

ウレリックスの憂鬱

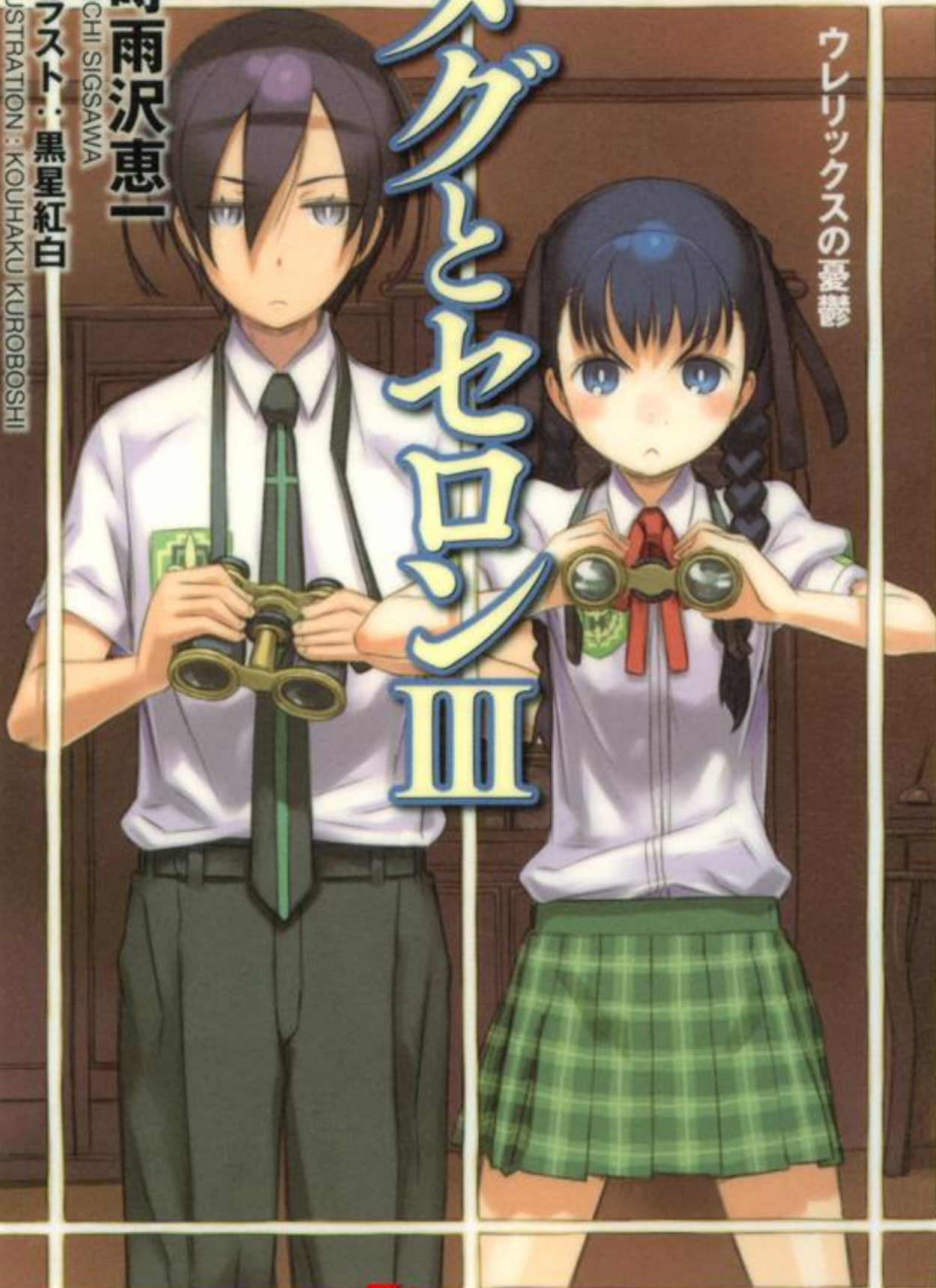
メグとゼロ III

時雨沢恵一

KEIICHI SIGSAWA

イラスト：黒星紅白

ILLUSTRATION: KOUHAKU KUROBOSHI



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メグとセロンⅢ

ウレリックスの憂鬱





ナタリア・スタインベック（ナシーヤ、またはナータ）

三一九〇年、第六の月八日生まれの十五歳。上級学校三年生。
有名音楽家の両親を持つ。
オーケストラ部所属で、楽器演奏が得意。



セロン・マクスウェル

三一九〇年、第三の月三日生まれの十五歳。
上級学校三年生。
ロクシア・マクスウェル（ロクシ）の
首都特別地域にある第四上級学校生徒。
実業が得意なため、部活は未所属。



ラリー・ハフバーン

三一九〇年。
第五の月十一日生まれの十五歳。
上級学校三年生。
歴史ある軍人の家系に生まれ、
自らも軍人を目指し鍛錬中。
セロンの大親友。



シトラウスキー・メグミカ（メク）

三八八九年、第二の月十四日生まれの十六歳。
上級学校三年生。
ペセル・イルト・ア・エ国連合（スー・ペール）出身で
シトラウスキーが名字。
ロクシへの引継ぎとして転校で二年生になっている。
コーラス部所属。



ジニー・ジョーンズ

三一九〇年。
第二の月十七日生まれの十五歳。
上級学校三年生。
ロクシ・ジョーンズを争う大富豪の
家の生まれ。新聞部の部長。



ニコラス・ブラウニング（ニク）

三一九〇年、第四の月四日生まれの十五歳。上級学校三年生。
中性的な容姿の持ち主。部活は未所属。
セロンとは顔見知り。



Seron Maxwell

Born on the 3rd day of the third month of the year 3290. 15 years old. A third-year student at the 4th Capital Secondary School in the Capital District of the Roxcheanuk Confederation. His hometown is far from school, so he lives in the dorms.

Strauski Megmica

Born on the 14th day of the second month of the year 3289. 16 years old. A third-year student. She is from the Allied Kingdoms of Bezel-Iltoa. 'Strauski' is her family name. Because she started school a year after moving to Roxche, she is a year older than her classmates. Megmica is a member of the chorus club.

Larry Hepburn

Born on the 12th day of the fifth month of the year 3290. 15 years old. A third-year student. He is from military family with a very long history, and trains daily to become a soldier himself. Larry is Seron's best friend.

Natalia Steinbeck

Born on the 8th day of the sixth month of the year 3290. 15 years old. A third-year student. Her parents are famous musicians. Natalia is part of the orchestra club, and is skilled with musical instruments.

Nicholas Browning

Born on the 4th day of the fourth month of the year 3290. 15 years old. A third-year student. He has an androgynous appearance and is not part of any clubs. Nicholas and Seron are previously acquainted.

Jenny Jones

Born on the 17th day of the first month of the year 3290. 15 years old. A third-year student. She is the daughter of one of the richest people in Roxche. Jenny is the president of the newspaper club.

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ウレリックスの憂鬱



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Daytime, a certain location. The year 3305 of the World Calendar.

Why?
Why him?
Why did it have to be him?

Years ago, I met him.
He looked so very unreliable.
He looked so very kind.

But—
How did it come to this?

How
did it come to this?

Still—
No matter how things are—
I can't deny the truth.

I love him.

Chapter 1: Arthur

The 9th day of the seventh month, the year 3305 of the World Calendar.

The Roxcheanuk Confederation—also known as Roxche—composed the eastern half of the only continent in the world.

Roxche's capital was known simply as the Capital District. Near the northwestern edge of this area was the 4th Capital Secondary School. And on that campus was a building that housed the school's newspaper club.

The newspaper club boasted the most luxurious room in the entire school.

The clubroom was about half the size of a classroom, was furnished with sofas, tables, chairs, and desks, and had a kitchenette with a hot plate. There was even an adjacent darkroom.

A cool northerly breeze wafted in through the open window and shook the lace curtains that people with an eye for textiles would recognize as astronomically expensive. The sky was a clear blue that day.

Sitting all alone on the sofa in the large room was a petite 15-year-old girl with red hair. Jenny Jones, the president of the newspaper club.

"Looks like I'll be busy for quite a while," she said, downing her tea in one go.

Five empty teacups were on the coffee table between the two sofas. A sixth joined them.

"Let's get started!"

Jenny sat up and leapt clear over the coffee table. Sitting at a desk, she pulled out a brand-new notebook from the shelf. With a fountain pen she wrote, '3305 Newspaper Club Activities' on the cover. Then she opened it to a page with grids.

In neat handwriting, she began to make her plans.

'Summer camp: Highlight of club activities. Hold at vacation home and drill spirit of journalism into members. Teach members to use camera and darkroom. To do ASAP.'

'Camping: Separate event from summer camp. Maybe at a campsite near the Kurz Sea? Larry might make himself very useful. Take note.'

'Regular publication: Goal for fall term is 2 issues a month. Leave individual articles to members, but Strauski Megmica's Bezelese might work for a separate corner on Bezelese lessons.'

'Photography exhibit: Put members' photos on display. Will make photography club pay for insulting my photos. Willing to assimilate them into newspaper club.'

'School festival: Participate at all costs. Six members are enough, but the more the merrier. Maybe make the newspaper club the biggest club in school?'

'Police: Almost forgot. Agreed to cooperate with Theodore Hartnett, but it doesn't really matter when. Don't try too hard. The cop forgot to tell us his real name. Oh well.'

Jenny's fountain pen stopped. She grinned.

"Heh."

She pushed back her chair and took to her feet.

"I'm gonna do this! I'll get all this done!"

Jenny strode over to the telephone, grabbed the receiver, and turned the dial.

A moment later.



“Hi, it’s me! It’s been a while. Yeah, I’m just fine. I was wondering if the vacation home in Ercho Village is vacant for the summer. I want to bring my friends. ...Really? I want a reservation! Six guests, including me,” Jenny said into the receiver.

* * *

Just as the president of the new-and-improved newspaper club took action, inside a large gymnasium on the same campus—

“It is I, the Black Knight! In darkness do I live; in darkness do I kill!”

A boy in a school-issue tracksuit swept forward dramatically.

It was the third day of the drama club’s practice camp, which also involved the orchestra club and the chorus club.

The gymnasium at the edge of campus was enveloped in a cool breeze.

A line of tape ran down the center of the gym. It marked the boundary of the stage, upon which several drama club members were standing.

One of them, however, was not a member of the drama club.

He had long, light brown hair and handsome features. The boy was Nicholas Browning, who could easily pass for a girl in looks alone.

“I shall strike down all who stand in my way!” he cried, his slender arms stretched out theatrically. Each time he turned, his long hair cascaded across his back.

In front of the stage were drama club members in tracksuits with scripts in hand. Behind them were members of the orchestra club, clad in uniform and seated on standby. And to their right were the four chorus club members, also in uniform and also seated.

“He’s so cool!”

Most of the students there were girls; and most were captivated by Nick’s performance. When he moved to stage right, heads turned. When he moved to stage left, heads turned again.

But in the orchestra was one of the few who weren’t enraptured.

She was a bespectacled girl with long brown hair tied up in a ponytail.

“So beautiful it’s a curse,” she said under her breath as she recalled their conversation the previous day. Her violin rested on her lap.

“Did you say something, Nat?” asked a classmate next to her.

Natalia Steinbeck turned to her friend with a look so plain it was almost cold.

“I did. I was wondering who was prettier—me or the knight?”

“Pfft!”

The girl burst into laughter. So did Natalia.

In one of the chairs to the right of the orchestra was another girl who was watching, but not captivated by Nick’s performance.

She had a fair complexion and had long, sleek black hair tied into pigtails.

“Yes. He was again cool yesterday,” she said to her senior-classmen.

She was responding to their endless praises for Nick by referring to the performance he had showcased in the basement the previous day.

“Hm? He sure is.”

But the senior-classmen did not think too much about what she meant, as they assumed she had simply gotten ‘today’ and ‘yesterday’ mixed up.

The pigtailed girl was from the Allied Kingdoms of Bezel-Iltoa—also known as Sou Be-II—which took up the western half of the continent. Her name was Strauski Megmica. In Sou Be-II, the family name came before the given name.

“It is a very wonderful thing to know many people while doing my club activities.”

Her senior-classmen nodded absently again. Megmica was referring in part to the newspaper club, which she had just joined, but the meaning did not carry across completely.

“It is a wonderful thing,” Meg repeated to herself.

Two boys watched Meg from the other side of the gymnasium.

Two boys who were not part of the drama, orchestra, or chorus clubs.

One of them wore a school-issue tracksuit with a green T-shirt underneath. He was short in stature but muscular and fit. His blond hair was cropped short, and he had sky-blue eyes. In addition, his cheek was still swollen from the previous day.

“Someday, I’ll make her your girlfriend. You’ll be the happiest couple in the world. Prepare yourself, Seron,” he boasted to the other boy while no one else was in earshot.

“I...well...sure, but...”

The other boy was also in a school-issue tracksuit. He had black hair and grey eyes.

The boy named Seron Maxwell replied nervously, “Please, Larry. Just make sure you don’t blurt out how I feel about her out of the blue.”

Larry Hepburn grinned. “I won’t. Don’t worry about it, buddy. That’s *your* job, no two ways about it. And now that you’re both in the newspaper club, you’ll have more chances than ever!”

Seron stood stiffly, deep in thought.

“What’s wrong?”

Seron met Larry’s gaze, awestruck.

“I...I’m the luckiest guy in the world. The God of Fortune is looking down on me, I know it. I must be the happiest person in this entire school.”

It was Larry’s turn to fall silent. He looked up at the ceiling, then at the floor. Then he looked back at Seron.

“...Seron Maxwell. Are you satisfied with that?”

“Yeah. Before the camp, I couldn’t even talk to Megmica.”

“Right...but if you let yourself stop here, you’re not gonna make any progress.”

“But I can relish this feeling for the time being. That’s reason enough to be happy.”

“I...I see...” Larry nodded dubiously, looking away. “Man, I really want to step in,” he said to himself, “Wish he’d just tell her outright...”

Next to the makeshift stage stood a boy who carefully scrutinized Nick’s performance.

“He’s making quite an impact... I’d better do my best too.”

He was a bespectacled boy in a school-issue tracksuit embroidered with the name ‘Sears’. He was a fifth-year student, which made him one of the oldest students in the gymnasium. Arthur Sears, the president of the drama club.

Arthur was tall and fit. His black hair was parted down the middle and almost went down to his eyebrows.

His square-rimmed glasses distorted his face because they had very thick lenses. He looked like an honest young man who might be suited to working at a bank. But he also seemed a little soft-spoken.

“You’re more than a match, Arthur. You can do it,” encouraged the girl next to him.

She was also in a school-issue tracksuit. Hers were embroidered with the name ‘Ulericks’.

Fellow fifth-year student Sophia Ulericks was the vice-president of the drama club. She had light brown back-length hair held back with a headband. She was freckled, and unlike Arthur seemed to be very outgoing.

Both were holding scripts.

The play they were to put on was a classic tale of good versus evil. It was a well-known story in Roxche.

The story took place in the Middle Ages. In the tale, a young king disguised himself and left on a journey with several friends in order to broaden his horizons. Along the way, he encountered a corrupt and greedy lord and rescued the peasants who suffered under his rule.

Nick’s character, the Black Knight, was hired by the lord. He was a skilled mercenary who fought for the thrill of battle.

The Black Knight gave the king and his friends no end of trouble, but eventually he fought a one-on-one gun duel with the king and was grievously injured. He realized the king’s true identity then, but revealed it to no one and disappeared.

The tale had been adapted into radio dramas and stage plays many times over, and had even become a series. The noble Black Knight was a particularly popular character because he ultimately became one of the king’s allies.

In this performance, Arthur played the lead as the young king, and Sophia played a major supporting character—a brave village girl who appealed to the young king about the peasants’ plight.

Nick’s performance continued under the gaze of the students.

“Only in battle does my soul breathe and my blood boil. Only in battle do I find life. I live for naught else. I am permitted naught but victory! You are brave to raise your blade at me; I acknowledge your valor. And with that same veneration, I shall send you to the depths of hell. You’d best have an epitaph prepared, for I am the Black Knight!” Nick finished, his performance thick with belligerence.

“Excellent! Great show, Nick. That tone was perfect!” cheered an equally resounding voice.

The voice belonged to a woman in her thirties, dressed in a non-school-issue tracksuit. Her long black hair was tied back in a ponytail. She was Leni Krantz, the supervisor of the drama club.

“Just a few things before we move on, Nick. When you show up to cut down the villagers, try and move a little faster. Everything in the middle was good. And about the last part, when you strike your pose... Give yourself half a beat between ‘for I’ and ‘am the Black Knight’. What you did just now doesn’t place enough emphasis on his identity. I want you to seriously try to rival the leading man. Good work,” Ms. Krantz said, waving around a rolled-up script. She was even more pumped up than usual, as if she were making up for the previous day’s missed practice.

Nick nodded earnestly. “I understand, Ms. Krantz. Shall I try again?”

“Not right now. Just keep it in mind for next time. Let’s move on, everyone! The king and the village girl in the sunset! King, village girl, you two are up. We’ll go without music this time.”

“Let’s go, Sophia,” Arthur said, handing his script to a female student. Sophia did the same.

They took center stage after Nick stepped off. With deep breaths they prepared themselves for the scene—a gallant look rose to Arthur’s eyes, and Sophia suddenly seemed more frail.

“All right. Let’s begin!”

Sophia was looking up at Arthur with her hands clasped over her chest, as though in prayer. He was the first to speak.

“I know that he is a dangerous foe, my lady.”

Then it was Sophia’s turn.

“But I can’t let you get hurt on our account—” she cut herself off. “Sorry, that was the wrong line.”

“It’s ‘the villagers and I are grateful’,” Arthur said, returning to his usual soft-spoken self.

“I expect better from our vice-president. Our mercenary is giving us a run for our money! But you did have some great chemistry going back there,” Ms. Krantz pointed out.

Sophia bowed deeply. “Right, ma’am! I’ll do better this time!” She looked up and met Arthur’s kind, bespectacled gaze.

“Don’t push yourself too hard, Sophia. You’re a much better actor than I am.”

Sophia was silent.

“What is it?”

“No, nothing... I’m okay now.”

After that, Arthur and Sophia ran through the very long scene without making a single mistake. Ms. Krantz was beaming.

“Excellent! I knew you could do it!”

* * *

Practice went on, and they soon reached the climax of the story.

The orchestra’s performance seemed to shake the gymnasium as the drama club poured out their hearts. Nick continued to elegantly weave across the stage.

They went through the scene where the king's companion fell to an injury. The scene where the Black Knight lost the duel and departed. And finally, the scene where the king said his goodbyes to the villagers.

The chorus club's haunting voices danced with the music, casting a perfect tone for the finale.

In the meantime, Seron and Larry were busy opening windows to ventilate the gymnasium or running over to the supply room to get large kettles of water for the thirsty students.

"Yep. I'm definitely tired. What about you, Seron?"

"Me too. I think I'll sleep well tonight."

Having been questioned into the night at the Sou Be-Il embassy the previous day, Larry and Seron occasionally yawned loudly out of earshot.

The sun began to tilt, and eventually beams of light flooded into the windows and bounced blinding sunlight against the floor.

"Great show, everyone! That's all for today," Ms. Krantz said at the end of the practice session. "Sorry I kept you so long. We'll be working hard tomorrow too, so make sure to sleep off all that fatigue!"

The orchestra club took their instruments to their usual haunt, music room 1. The chorus club went to music room 2.

Nick was busy cleaning up props, and Seron and Larry were mopping the floor. They did not have time to say goodbye to Natalia and Meg.

"Oh. They're leaving," Larry groaned mid-mop when he spotted the chorus club leave.

But Seron sounded surprisingly calm. "It's all right. There's always tomorrow."

After mopping the sweat-stained floor and the windows, Seron and Larry stood behind Nick and the other drama club members.

"Thank you, Ms. Krantz!"

Day 3 of the practice camp came to an end.

The sky was clear that evening. The drama club was waking in a haphazard line to the dormitory building on the other side of campus. The campus was usually bustling with students during the term, but there was no one around now.

Because practice had ended so late, the cafeteria was already open.

"I'm so hungry I could eat a horse. Dinner's gonna taste better than usual, I can feel it," Larry said, holding four empty kettles in his arms.

"Yeah. I wonder what they're serving now," Seron nodded, pushing a cart full of mugs.

"I'm quite excited for dinner. So far, the dormitory cafeteria has lived up to its reputation," Nick added, holding his script.

A pair of eyes were watching them.

The eyes belonged to a freckled fifth-year student wearing a headband.

"I'm happy with either meat or vegetables—"

Seron noticed the gaze just a few meters ahead, and looked at the fifth-year—Sophia.

“What’s up, Seron?”

“No, it’s nothing.”

But all he saw was light brown, back-length hair.

* * *

Seron and the others went straight to the cafeteria.

The cafeteria had enough seats for hundreds of students. Long tables were lined up in orderly rows in the rectangular space, which was large enough to serve as a banquet hall in a hotel. There were two serving counters, but one was closed for the summer.

For dinner, students had a choice between the meatloaf special and pot-au-feu with heaps of meat and vegetables.

“Yes! They’re both meat!” Larry cheered, getting himself a thick slice of meatloaf and a veritable mountain of pot-au-feu.

Seron elected for the pot-au-feu, and Nick the meatloaf. The boys each collected bread, fruit, and a cup of tea and took their seats.

Many of the girls were brimming with anticipation, clearly hoping to sit near Seron and Nick. But—

“Done! Let’s eat!”

Larry’s loud voice reminded them of his presence and shattered their fantasies, and many angry forks stabbed into chunks of meat and potatoes.

Seron was none the wiser.

“Yeah. Let’s eat.”

Nick, though more perceptive, did not point it out.

“Yes. Dinner looks delicious.”

After dinner, the drama club dispersed for the day.

Some played pool or foosball in the dormitory common room. Some called their families from the phone booths in the lobby. Some returned to their rooms. Some delved into their scripts in preparation for the next day. And others went straight to the baths to wash off their sweat.

Outside, it was a typical summer evening. The sky beyond the five-story apartments around the campus was turning orange.

“Bath, Larry?”

“Nah. Let’s let dinner digest a bit before we go.”

Seron and Larry did not head straight for the baths, instead deciding to take a short break in their room.

“Then I shall join you at the baths later. I need some time to prepare.”

They said goodbye to Nick, who was staying on another floor, and returned to their room.

Seron and Larry’s room was on the third floor. From the window they had a great view of the field. The sun was slowly setting over the many buildings of the Capital District.

Because the room was built to house two, it was larger than the regular ones. It was furnished with two dressers, two desks and chairs, and two beds with wooden frames. There was also a sofa that could be converted into yet another bed.

Seron's belongings included a large leather suitcase and a paper shopping bag from the department store, still containing the books he had bought. Larry had brought in a green Confederation Army duffel bag, which was large enough to fit a person, along with a backpack.

Larry took a seat on the sofa.

"That was great. I'm stuffed. I bet I'll fall right asleep if I lie down now."

Seron took off his tracksuit top and hung it up neatly. "Me too. It was a really busy day. And who knew we'd end up joining the newspaper club? I'd have laughed if you told me that yesterday."

Stripped down to his T-shirt, Seron pulled out a chair and sat down. He remembered what had happened earlier that day and stared at his right hand.

Larry looked at Seron, who was as expressionless as ever. "It's incredible. Now you're in the same club as Megmica. You can see her anytime even after summer break. You should try and sound happier, buddy."

"Yeah... I know. But..."

"But?"

"Now I'm even less motivated to ask her out. I was thinking about asking her before the practice camp ended. And if she turned me down, I would just give up. But now..."

"Ah... I see. No need to finish that sentence. You're happy being around her. You don't want to risk that time you have. I understand. I won't say a word to her about this. Not even if they killed me or tortured me."

"Yeah. Thanks, Larry." Seron smiled.

Larry fell deep into thought.

Neither Seron nor Larry spoke for quite a while. Time passed in silence.

"Oh, right."

Suddenly, Seron stood and took out a white cloth laundry bag from his suitcase. His name and student number were printed on it. Students could put shirts, underwear, and other pieces of clothing into the bags and leave them with the matrons, who would send the clothes to a laundromat service. The clean clothing would be placed back into the bags and returned to the dorms the next day.

"Do you have anything that needs washing, Larry? I'm going to drop off my laundry. They might close the window at night during the summer. We'll probably get them back tomorrow evening."

"Huh? Oh, some shirts and underwear."

"Do you mind putting them in my bag? We'll be able to tell them apart?"

"No worries. I've got my name written on all my clothes, down to the last sock. Sometimes in training camp you get people who steal 'em when they run out of their own."

Larry leapt off the sofa and stuck his hand inside his duffel bag. He drew a cloth bag similar to Seron's, but labeled 'ARMY' instead.

"Thanks, man."

Seron put the bag into his own laundry bag.

"All right. I'll be right back. Tell Nick to wait for us if he comes over."

He left the room, closing the door behind him. Seron's footsteps disappeared down the hall.

Larry stood in the middle of the room, his arms crossed.

"I just hope he doesn't end up graduating without asking her out. In that case, I might be better off telling Megmica about him instead... But if she's going to turn him down, it might be better for Seron to just spend time with her and have fun as friends. Cato always said a girl can throw away her boyfriend and act as if nothing had ever happened... But if that happens, Seron's going to spend the next three years crying with that blank face of his. Hmm..."

Larry paced back and forth as he ruminated on his dilemma.

Eventually,

"Is that some new type of training?"

"My, you resemble a bear in a zoo."

Seron and Nick came back to the room together.

The dormitory baths were massive.

They were built to be bigger than even hotel baths in order to let as many students use the facilities as possible while making them wait as little as possible. Rows of faucets were installed against the walls, and several large tubs drew elegant arcs along their edges. A white porcelain sculpture of a chiseled hero was pouring water from the turtle atop its shoulders.

Seron and Nick wrapped towels around their waists and stepped out of the change room. Larry followed after them a little later.

Seron and Nick were both on the slender side, but neither were particularly skinny.

Nick had his hair done up. It never showed when he was clothed, but he was all lean muscle, like a marathon runner.

"You work out, Nick? Looks like you've been doing whatever it is for a while," Larry remarked curiously. Though short, Larry was muscular. He had a great interest in bodybuilding.

Nick smiled. "Yes. I perform on stage."

"You call that working out?"

"Contrary to popular belief, it takes quite a bit of energy. Care to give it a try?"

"No thanks. What's that you've got with you?"

Larry was pointing at a large wooden basket in Nick's right hand. Three metallic bottles were nestled inside.

"My usual hair-care products. My hair simply will not listen to me unless I go all the way."

"If you were in the military, they'd have shaved you bald. Tradition says any strand longer than a rifle round gets the razor."

"I do plan to cut it short should I ever enlist."

"Great! Why wait? I'll bring you the papers tomorrow. The Confederation Army wants you!"

"I'm afraid I'll have to decline. I haven't yet decided on a career path. In fact, I believe we should turn this around and have you grow out your hair, Larry. To be honest, I'm quite envious of your beautiful blond hair."

“My ancestors in our old portraits used to wear ‘em really long. But I’m not really a braids man.”

“What about you, Seron? Do you plan to grow out your hair?”

“No. I’m going to get it trimmed when it grows out a little longer. Although I’m not too keen on going back to my old buzz cut.”

They sat on wooden bath chairs in front of the empty faucets along the wall. There had been no other clothes in the change room, which meant the bath was empty. Seron, Larry, and Nick had the entire bath to themselves. They washed up at the faucets and then sat in one of the massive baths.

“Hah...”

“That hits the spot.”

“It certainly does.”

Larry, Seron, and Nick sighed.

For some time, they simply sat soaking in the water.

On occasion they wiped the sweat from their faces with the towels they had on their heads. Time passed.

“I’m quite jealous that you have constant access to these baths, Seron,” Nick said.

“Agreed.” Larry nodded.

“Not many people know this,” Seron said, “but even non-dormitory students can use the baths during the school year.”

“Oh? That’s a pleasant surprise. I suppose I should try it out next term.”

“I had no idea.”

“Sometimes people from sports clubs come to use the baths after practice. But the problem is...as big as this place is, it still gets really crowded during the mornings and evenings. You can’t really take your time because there’s always a lineup.”

“I’ll retract my statement, then. It takes me quite a long time to wash my hair.”

“Me too. Although a bath beats a shower anytime.”

“I just reminded myself,” said Nick, “It’s about time for me to wash my hair. Please excuse me for a moment.”

He stood from the bath, took his basket, and headed for the rows of shower booths. He turned on the water and began to gingerly lather his long hair.

“What do you say to some training, Seron?” Larry asked, taking to his feet. Seron shook his head.

“I don’t think I can today.”

“You’ll never become a great soldier like that, buddy!”

“It’s okay. I know you’ll be great enough for the both of us. Roxche’s future is in your hands, Larry.”

“Looks like I’ve got no choice. ...One! Two! Three! Army!”

One energetic boy began to loudly do push-ups on the tiled floor.

One long-haired boy hummed to himself as he washed his hair in the distance.

And one boy who loved to soak in the bath blankly gazed into the air.

The porcelain sculpture said nothing as it poured water into the bath.

“Is anyone here?”

A new voice joined them.

The owner of the voice sat down at a nearby faucet the moment he entered, making it hard to tell who he was.

“Is that SC Arthur?” Seron wondered.

“Sounds like him. Hup! Hup! Hup!” Larry agreed, and lowered his voice so as not to be a nuisance.

Eventually, the newcomer finished washing up and came over to Seron and Larry. He was tall, and his black hair was swept back.

“Hey there.”

He was almost as well-built as Larry.

“Hello, SC Arthur. You look very different without your glasses,” Seron said. Arthur did not look as soft-spoken when his hair was slicked back and his glasses were gone.

“That’s what everyone tells me. But I’m so nearsighted that I can’t go without them. I recognized you by your voice, Seron, but I can’t see your face at all,” Arthur said, as laid-back as ever, and sat where Nick had been earlier. He sighed and looked up at the ceiling.

Once Larry had done 100 push-ups, he returned to the bathtub massaging his arms. “Hey there, SC Arthur.”

“Ah, so you were Larry. I wanted to ask you during the day, but why is your face swollen? Are you all right?”

“Oh...er... I got into a bit of a scuffle. But don’t worry—it was outside of school.”

“I see. If you two are here, I guess our Black Knight must be around too.”

“Yes. He’s washing his hair at the showers,” Seron replied.

“He was very good today. I was impressed.”

“You and SC Sophia were awesome, too,” Larry said. “I don’t know anything about theater, but you two looked like totally different people up there.”

“I’m glad to hear that. I’m sure Sophia will be too,” Arthur replied with a smile. That was when Nick returned.

“Oh? SC Arthur.”

He had a towel wrapped around his waist, and also around his head. His long hair was concealed completely.

Nick looked completely different when his long hair was covered. He looked very masculine. The towel on his head cast an odd silhouette.

“Er... Nick, is that you?” Arthur squinted.

“What’s with the hair? Is that how things work in your hometown?” Larry asked. Nick brought over a bath chair from the faucets and replied, “The fibers of the wet towel stimulate your brain cells and make you more intelligent. Would you care to try, Larry?”

“Thanks for the info, but if I get too smart Seron’s ‘teaching really well to idiots’ skill’s gonna get rusty. No, seriously though.”

“I do this to keep my head warm long enough that the treatment will permeate into my hair.”

“Heh. No need for me to try, then.”

Larry lost interest completely and sat waist-deep in the bath. He looked at Arthur. So did Nick.

“Did you come alone, SC Arthur?”

“Yeah. The other guys are hanging out with the girls in the common room. They were playing a game where one person recites a long line, then another person tries to repeat it without making a mistake. It’s one of the drama club’s traditions.”

“It must be quite lively with all the girls in the club,” Nick remarked. Arthur chuckled.

“You’re welcome to join, Nick. Join the guys as the girls beat us in majority votes all the time. If nothing else, I guarantee you that you’ll start questioning the wisdom of democracy.”

“I can already imagine. I’m afraid I’ll have to decline, SC Arthur. It must be difficult for you.”

“It’s not too bad. Sophia pulls her weight, and then some.” Arthur sighed. “Sometimes, I wonder how things would have been if she had been president.”

Seron stared in blank silence. Larry did the same, looking more worried.

“You’re a great president, SC Arthur,” Larry said.

Nick nodded. “I agree.”

“Thanks, guys. I can’t stop being the president now, so I want to do my best with the job I have. I practically stole away Sophia’s position, so I have to work even harder for her sake.”

“Hm? What do you mean?” Larry asked. Seron and Nick quietly waited for the answer.

“The drama club presidency alternates between gender every year. If a boy is the president one year, a girl has to be president the next. It’s the opposite with the vice-presidency.”

“Wow,” Larry gasped.

“Then was last year’s president male?” asked Nick. Arthur pushed back his bangs and nodded.

“Yeah. At least, until he dropped out of school around the end of the year.”

Everyone was quiet.

Low grades were the most common cause of dropouts in secondary school, whether because of difficulties in class or being held back two years in a row, which automatically resulted in expulsion. The second most common cause—which was not very common at all—was misbehavior or delinquency.

Either cause would disqualify a student from moving on to university, which would have presumably been the student’s reason for coming to secondary school in the first place. So students had every reason to avoid such things.

“May we ask why?” Nick inquired cautiously. Arthur noticed the mood and waved his hands.

“Don’t worry, it wasn’t anything bad. SC Joshua left for a very good reason. The Confederation Theater Company recognized his skills and scouted him. He chose to take the stage as a young newcomer with a bright future instead of going on to university. SC Joshua’s the eldest son of a family that runs a famous electronics company. The family was completely against their talented heir pursuing a different path in life, but he managed to convince them otherwise. I hear he’s taking on more prominent roles now. Sophia and I went to watch him the other day, and he was practically a star.”

“That sounds incredible.” “I had no idea we had a senior-classman like that,” Nick and Seron remarked in turn.

“Cool,” Larry said.

Arthur nodded. "Definitely. He was brave to make such an important decision. I love theater too, but if someone asked me if I wanted to be an actor, I could say 'no' with confidence. I plan to go to university, then go to graduate school and major in business management so I can help out my family. That's the whole reason I came to this school."

"Your family runs a traditional patisserie, right?" asked Larry. "My mother loves Sears cakes. She serves it all the time at parties. When I was little, my favorite part was eating the very edges."

"Thanks. And I hope we'll have her continued patronage. Anyway, when SC Joshua left, the then-vice-president stepped up as president for the rest of the year. It was unprecedented, but since we had just gone through a female president, we had to pick a male president for this year. I was the only boy in fifth year this year, so I was chosen to take over."

"I see." Seron nodded.

"Then SC Sophia was originally meant to be this year's president?" asked Nick.

"That's right. When I first met her not long after joining the drama club, I was really impressed. She was a great actress, she was good at memorizing—and remembering—her lines, and she was always motivated. By third year, we took it for granted that she'd become president eventually. Even the more envious of the girls supported her. And Sophia did her best to learn by helping SC Joshua and our previous president," Arthur said. He was growing more and more talkative, perhaps out of nostalgia. "SC Joshua being scouted was an honor for him and the drama club, but because of that, Sophia was forced to take the vice-presidency instead. She never complained about it, and I did my best with my job, but sometimes I wonder if this is really all right. I know I'm never going to get a black-and-white answer, so all I can do is try my hardest with what I have. And I want to reflect as much of Sophia's opinions as possible when I make decisions as the president."

Seron, Larry, and Nick were silent. They became painfully aware of the sound of water gushing from the porcelain sculpture.

"S-sorry, guys," Arthur said quickly, trying to raise their spirits, "I didn't mean to get you all down like that. It's just that I can't really talk about this stuff with the drama club. Don't worry about it. Thanks for helping out with practice. I'll see you guys tomorrow."

Arthur stood and left as the others bid him good night. He walked away.

"Must be tough, huh," Larry said pensively.

Seron gravely nodded. "I'm sure we'll have to make a lot of big decisions in fifth year, too."

"Although in your case, you've got a big decision coming before that," Larry commented.

"Oh? And what might that be?"

"Nothing for you to worry about, Nick."

"There you go again, Larry. Please, aren't we fellow members of the newspaper club?"

"Oh yeah, that was today. I'm gonna forget I'm in a club if I don't write it down somewhere."

"Perhaps we should compose a club theme song and sing it together every morning?" Nick chuckled.

Larry pointed a finger at Nick's head. "Nick. That towel treatment of yours is sucking the brainpower out of you."

"Ah, I'd almost forgotten about my hair. Thank you, Larry."

Nick stood and walked back to the showers.

"The Army wants you!" Larry called after him. Nick waved lightly.

"We're only in third year," said Seron, "It's okay. I have time."

"You sure about that?"

Seron gave Larry a very serious look.

"Yeah. Probably. I'm sure. Definitely."

Larry thought for a moment. Then,

"Seron. Don't tell me..."

"Yeah?"

"Are you feeling faint 'cause you stayed in the bath for too long?"

"... Yeah."

Just as Seron cooled off in a tepid shower—

"I'm running out of time..."

A fifth-year girl was muttering to herself alone at the desk in her dormitory room. She had her elbows on the desk and was leaning her forehead against her clasped hands.

The only light in the room came from a small nightstand. The moon was not yet out and it was still dark outside, the world lit only by lights from nearby apartment buildings.

The girl wore a headband and had a freckled face.

Sophia Ulericks, the vice-president of the drama club, closed her eyes and fell into thought.

Then,

"Okay! I'll do this! I'm going to tell Arthur!" She jumped to her feet, renewing her determination.

"Tell him what?" asked her roommate, walking in with a towel over her hair.

Sophia screamed loud enough for her headband to go flying.

Chapter 2: Sophia

The 10th day of the seventh month.

Morning dawned on the fourth day of the practice camp.

It was another clear day swept by a pleasant northerly breeze.

Seron, Larry, and Nick had gone to bed early the previous night, and sat together at the cafeteria table for breakfast in school-issue tracksuits. Then they headed to the gymnasium with the rest of the drama club.

A little later, Natalia and Meg showed up in uniform and greeted them offhand.

Seron's face was blank with joy.

Practice began.

The drama club and Ms. Krantz were even more passionate than before. The orchestra club and the chorus club matched their drive, creating beautiful music and filling the gymnasium with energy.

Meanwhile,

"Gotta do our job."

"It's fun watching them, though."

Larry and Seron ran around doing odd jobs like opening windows, bringing in tea, and carrying heavy objects.

Lunchtime neared.

"The orchestra and chorus club can go ahead for lunch," said Ms. Krantz, "See you in the afternoon."

Because of the way practice was scheduled, the orchestra club and the chorus club were allowed to leave early. The drama club got together to discuss the placement of set pieces.

The orchestra members put away their instruments or left them in the gym and headed off to enjoy their lunch. Word had spread about the delicious cafeteria food; fewer students had brought their own lunches this time, and more joined the group headed for the dormitory building.

"We'll see you later, Megmica." The three girls from the chorus club waved as they went to music room 2 to eat their lunches.

"Let's go ahead, then."

Behind Meg was Natalia, standing tall like a bodyguard. The chorus girls thought well of her after her actions on the first day of practice.

"Oh, one second," Natalia said, pointing at the two helpers closing the gymnasium window—specifically, at Larry.

Larry soon noticed her and pointed at himself as if in confirmation. Natalia gestured back in acknowledgement.

Larry jogged over to Natalia and Meg. "Hey Megmica. What do you want, Lia?" he said, using Natalia's childhood nickname.

“We’ll go ahead to the clubroom with everyone’s lunches, so you and Seron and Nick can come straight over once you’re done here.”

“Right. Is Jenny in today?”

“Yeah. She called me yesterday saying she’s got something big to announce as president. Gotta do what the boss says, y’know.”

“Come to think of it, you’re vice president now, aren’t you Lia?”

“Sure am. Feel free to add a ‘Madame’ in front of the name.”

“‘Madame Lia’? Sounds like a fortune teller.”

“True. Lunch menu’s up to me. Don’t care ‘bout you, but is Seron picky? Any allergies?”

“Probably not, but if you get me both lunches I can let Seron pick first. Oh, but don’t trouble yourself with both if one of the meals have soup or broth. It’d be a pain to carry over.”

“Right. See ya.”

Natalia and Meg left the gymnasium, the former with a wave and the latter with a bow. Larry went over to Seron, who was still closing windows.

And as for Sophia, who had been watching the entire exchange,

“Sophia! Hello? Are you still with us?”

She was scolded by Ms. Krantz, who had been addressing the entire club.

* * *

That day, around noon.

A brown-haired girl by the lengthy name of ‘Lillianne Aikashia Corazòn Whittington Schultz’ returned home carrying a leather suitcase and many large paper bags full of souvenirs.

“I’m home. —Not like anyone’s in, but oh well. Gonna take my time and enjoy the rest of my summer,” she said to herself, setting down her luggage in the hallway.

She brushed her teeth in the bathroom, washed her hands, and went to the kitchen. From the fridge she pulled out an unopened bottle of orange juice, twisted off the cap, and poured it into a cup. She drank it without even sitting down.

“Man...”

Lillia looked up at the blackboard on the wall before her. The family’s schedule was crammed tightly into every corner in white letters.

“Maybe I should call Meg...but I’m back so much earlier than I planned...”

She thought for a moment.

“Forget it. I’ll see her on the 14th anyway.”

Just as Lillia unpacked at home, the drama club disbanded for lunch.

The club members hurried over to the cafeteria in the dormitory building.

“Apparently Jenny’s on campus again today. Looks like she has a lot of time on her hands.”

“Do you think she might be angry with us if we don’t call her ‘president’?”

“Who knows? Either way, please don’t let anyone call me ‘treasurer’.”

Larry, Nick, and Seron headed for the newspaper club office. All three were in school-issue tracksuits.

They stepped into the building, walked through the empty hallways, and arrived at the door.

“We’re here,” Larry said, knocking.

They heard Jenny’s voice from inside. “Password? The planet explodes if you get it wrong.”

“I don’t know.”

“Hm. ‘I don’t know’... I guess that works as the new password. All right, Megmica. You can let them in.”

Meg unlocked the door from inside.

“Welcome in, everyone.” She beamed radiantly.

“Ah. Thanks, Megmica.” Larry grinned back.

“Thank you for the kind welcome.” Nick nodded with a smile.

“Thanks,” Seron said tersely, his expression blank even as he internally told himself that he was the happiest man in all of Roxche.

When they stepped into the luxurious room, they found Jenny standing before them. And in front of her—

“‘Cause we’re the newspaper club~ Always seeking truth and justice~”

Natalia sat on a chair, her long legs crossed. She strummed an off-kilter melody on a large guitar and sang stylishly along with a set of off-kilter lyrics.

“And so~ the chosen six are gathered~”

“Wh-what is that supposed to be, Lia?” Larry was incredulous. Natalia stopped.

“Our club song, genius. Nothing like a good tune to get some good ol’ team spirit going. As you can see, I’m busy composing the melody and the lyrics.” Natalia chuckled, playing a riff.

Larry narrowed his eyes and, without turning, addressed Nick behind him.

“Say, Nick.”

“Yes?”

“You’ve got a fellow patient here. And if she’s actually performing the song in public, I think her symptoms are worse than yours.”

“My, my. This is troubling. Perhaps we’ll feel better about this if all six of us were infected.”

“Nah. Who’s gonna speak the truth if everyone loses their minds? This is supposed to be a newspaper club.”

Natalia placed her guitar on the desk. “Don’t just stand there, boys. The sofa’s free. Let’s eat.”

On the coffee table were lunches for everyone from the cafeteria. There were eight bags in total, one for each student and extras for Larry and Natalia, who were big eaters.

“Thanks for getting our food, too. Who should we pay?” Seron asked, taking the center seat like he had done the previous day.

“Don’t sweat it. It’s my treat. The menu was pea soup with bread, or bacon and lettuce club sandwiches, but I settled for sandwiches for everyone. No complaints, hear? I’ll be happy to take your sandwich if you don’t want it,” said Natalia.



“Lia...you’re gonna turn into a tree trunk at this rate,” Larry said snidely, knowing that Natalia never gained weight no matter how much she ate.

“That might be something worth writing about, don’t you agree?”

“If that happens, I’ll give Larry a piggyback ride. Show him the view from up here, y’know?”

Nick and Natalia also took a seat.

“Do you want any help, Megmica?” Jenny asked, turning to the kitchenette.

“I am all right, Jenny. Thank you. I am just now finished,” Meg replied, walking over to the others with a platter laden with six different teacups. She carefully placed each cup of tea on the table before finally taking a seat herself.

Once Jenny was seated, she and the others thanked Natalia for the sandwiches. They prayed before their meals and dug in.

The bacon and lettuce were still crisp. The sandwiches were also packed with fresh tomato slices and cheese.

“This is great,” Jenny said, flattening her sandwich and taking big bites from the edges.

“Do you come out to school just for the cafeteria food?” Larry asked, picking up a flower-print teacup.

“Mm mmm.” Jenny denied the accusation with her mouth still shut.

“It is a wonderful thing to be able to eat together with everyone like this,” Meg said between bites. She was wrestling with her sandwich, but seemed to be enjoying it.

Nick agreed.

Seron said nothing, but thought very hard to himself, *‘Even centipedes would taste delicious as long as I’m with Megmica!’*

Jenny was the first to finish. She took sips of tea as she began her announcement. “All right, let me explain a few things while you eat. You guys are gonna learn some new skills for the club. First comes photography. I’ll give each of you a camera one of these days so you can practice. You’ll have to develop and print the photos yourselves. You’re also going to learn how to write newspaper articles and how to cover stories. We won’t have time during lunch, so I want you to meet back in here in the evening. This is an order from the president.”

“Sure, as long as practice doesn’t run late like yesterday.” “I understand. I will do so too as well. Everyone worried for my sake afterwards, so it is now not good to return home late,” Natalia and Meg said.

Seron, Larry, and Nick agreed.

“Hm...so much for being president,” Jenny groaned.

Once lunch break was over—

“We’ll come back if practice ends on time. We still have loads of photos to develop.”

The newspaper club sans Jenny left for the gym. Natalia placed her guitar in a wooden case and left it in the club office.

“I’ll bring in a couple of flutes tomorrow. Both alto and soprano.”

“Awesome. Sing us a song while you play, Lia,” Larry joked. Meg burst out laughing.

* * *

Like morning, afternoon practice was heated. Time passed quickly.

Seron and Larry went to buy more nails for the set pieces.

When they returned, the Black Knight conceded defeat and disappeared. Meg and the chorus club sang a heartfelt melody to match the scene.

“Too bad we missed most of that,” Larry said.

“We always have tomorrow,” Seron replied.

Evening drew near.

“We’ll finish early today to make up for yesterday, everyone,” said Ms. Krantz. “Good work! Excellent job!”

Practice ended earlier than usual.

“Man, now we *have* to go to the newspaper club,” Larry joked.

“The Goddess of Fortune is smiling upon us,” Seron said with a completely straight face.

Most students practically skipped out of the the gym, celebrating the early dismissal. On the other hand, Seron, Larry, Meg, and Natalia stood by the doors waiting for Nick.

When they peered inside, they saw Arthur and Nick exchanging opinions on the performance, making all sorts of gestures.

“Looks like our Black Knight’s really into his role,” Natalia remarked.

“The king played by SC Arthur was very cool also,” Meg said. Seron’s eye twitched.

That was when someone came up to them.

“Could I talk to you?”

When they turned, they saw the freckled, headband-wearing vice-president Sophia. She had left with the rest of the drama club, but now she was back alone. The newspaper club was surprised to see her.

“Is something the matter?” Seron spoke for everyone.

Sophia replied indifferently, “I need to talk to you. Do you have time?”

“Yes. But are you asking me alone?”

“All of you. The four of you, who aren’t in the drama club. It’s a little complicated.”

“I see.” Seron nodded. When he glanced back, he saw Nick and Arthur walking over, having finished their conversation. “Actually, we’re headed somewhere together. Would you mind coming with us?”

No sooner had he finished speaking than Sophia replied, “To the newspaper club?”

“Huh? H-how did you know?”

“I saw Jenny on campus this morning. And I figured you’d joined when all of you went somewhere else for lunch. It looks like you’ve gotten close,” Sophia said with a smile. The newspaper club was pleasantly surprised.

“Apologies for keeping you waiting,” Nick said. He was surprised when he spotted Sophia among the group.

“Nick is a member as well,” said Seron, “Would you mind if he came along?”

“Not at all.”

The five students and the surprising guest headed to the club office without a word.

Seron knocked on the door.

“Password?” Said Jenny’s voice. Larry replied immediately, “Do you have our keys yet?”

“Hold on a sec.”

Jenny opened the door. She was startled to see Sophia with the others.

“Huh?” She shot Seron an unpleasant glare. “A new member already? I expected no less from a pretty boy.”

“No, Jenny. SC Sophia says there’s something she’d like to discuss with us. Would you mind?”

“Does this have something to do with the newspaper club?” Jenny asked.

“Yes. I need your help. Remember how the newspaper club uncovered Ms. Julia Evans’s shotgun wedding two years ago, even when the vice-principal tried to make sure word didn’t get out? I was so glad you did—otherwise we never would have been able to congratulate her. I need you to dig up information like you did back then.”

Seron and the others were surprised to hear of Jenny’s exploits.

“...All right. Come in.” Jenny grinned took a step back, gesturing for Sophia to come inside.

Seven students sat in the club office.

Jenny sat in a chair, and the others on sofas with the boys on one and the girls on the other. Sophia sat in the middle, across from Seron.

Cups of steaming-hot tea sat on the coffee table. Sophia was taken aback to see such expensive cups. “Is it...really okay for me to use this?”

Jenny took up her pen and notepad. “Don’t worry about it. Now, what would you like to have us investigate?”

Sophia took a deep breath. A serious look rose to her eyes. “I want you to find something for me on campus.”

“Oh? Like what?” Jenny inquired, leaning forward. The others listened quietly.

“I know this might sound strange, but I don’t actually know what it is I’m looking for.”

“Hm.”

“If you recognize what it is, tell me straight out. Okay?” Sophia hesitated then, but continued. “Arthur used a term I’ve never heard of,” she said, averting her gaze.

Jenny took down every detail like a seasoned investigator. “We won’t laugh or anything, no matter how strange it might be. So what was this term he used?”

Sophia must have made up her mind. She returned to her usual self and confessed,

“The ‘50th bee’.”

“...Huh?”

The club members furrowed their brows.

“The ‘50th bee’. That’s the term. It was about 10 days ago...” Sophia explained, “It was still exam season, so we didn’t have practice that day. I was on my way home, heading to the gates. It was as crowded as ever. And I spotted Arthur walking a couple of meters ahead. He was talking with a boy I’ve never met.”

“I see. I see.” Jenny nodded along, furiously taking notes.

“They sounded like they were having fun, and it was so crowded I decided not to talk to him and kept walking. But that’s when I overheard them. The friend said, ‘come to think of it, what are you gonna do about the “50th bee”?’ Arthur just replied, ‘Hm...it’s too early.’ The friend suddenly got serious then. ‘Get a hold of yourself. We’re fifth-years now—you’d even sell your own parents for the ‘50th bee’, wouldn’t you?’ Then Arthur just said, ‘...You’re right. I’ll try. Sorry to make you worry.’ He sounded so faint then.”

Seron and the others on the sofas could not respond.

Jenny stopped taking notes. She looked like she had taken a bite out of a chocolate bar she had thought was a hamburger.

“That’s it. They went in different directions at the gates, and I didn’t talk to Arthur then,” Sophia concluded.

“SC Sophia...just making sure, is there any chance that you heard wrong?” Jenny asked.

“No. I know what I heard.”

“Really?” Jenny was unconvinced.

“I don’t think SC Sophia is misremembering. She’s good at memorizing dialogue,” Seron said, with the eyes of six students—including the girl he loved—on him. “Let’s get the facts straight, SC Sophia. SC Arthur wants to get his hands on something called the 50th bee before he graduates. And judging from the context, the 50th bee is somewhere in this school.”

“Yeah. That’s what I think.”

“And you want to find this 50th bee for SC Arthur, am I correct?”

“Yeah...” Sophia nodded. She picked up her tea and took a sip.

Seron noticed that Sophia and the other girls seemed to be very interested in the subject. And he realized that his suspicions were correct.

Looking around at each of the members, Seron asked, “Does anyone know what the 50th bee might be? I think ‘bee’ in this case means the insect.”

No one answered.

Unsurprised, Seron looked at Sophia. “To be honest, I don’t know what this term means either. I’ve never heard of anything like it. SC Arthur must have used a term that only his close friends would understand.”

“Yeah...I expected as much. I thought maybe it was a term all the boys might know.”

“Have you asked around the drama club?”

“This is the first I’ve told anyone about the 50th bee.”

Larry, who had been listening quietly, suddenly asked, “SC Sophia, why are you trying to get this 50th bee for SC Arthur anyway?”

“I...”

Sophia could not answer such a direct question.

“Ugh. Talk about dense.” Jenny rolled her eyes. No one else responded.

“No, well... I...I was just curious,” Larry stammered, looking to Nick for answers.

Nick noticed his gaze, but looked away as though avoiding the question.

Finally, Larry turned to Meg.

She looked troubled.

“Ahem. Sorry, SC Sophia. We have an idiot in the group,” Natalia said with a straight face.

“Hold it. Look. I admit I’m an idiot, so please tell me what’s going on here,” Larry pleaded.

For some reason, the rest of the newspaper club kept silent in thought. Several seconds passed.

Sophia was the one to break the silence.

“It’s because I love him.”

“Huh? Wait, what?” Larry asked in confusion.

“You’re hopeless. SC Sophia deserves a whole lotta gratitude right now.”

“That’s right. Maybe you should train more than just your muscles sometimes.”

Natalia and Jenny scolded Larry in turn.

“Right. Sorry. Er...I’m sorry, SC Sophia,” Larry said, shrinking back.

“It’s all right. I was going to tell you guys anyway,” Sophia replied kindly, “It wouldn’t be right to just ask you to do this for me without telling you why. But please don’t tell anyone else. Please.”

“Of course. We will protect your secret and do our utmost to assist you. Isn’t that right, president?” Nick said.

“Definitely. Like our club motto says, ‘accept all requests, and research the rest’,” Jenny replied.

“That’s the first I’ve heard,” Natalia commented. Jenny did not lose a second in responding.

“‘Mottos are meant to be made on the spot’.”

“Is that one of our mottos too?”

“Sure.”

“I’m counting on you.” Sophia smiled. That was when Meg jumped in.

“SC Sophia!”

“Whoa!”

Meg clasped her hands tightly over Sophia’s, trembling with excitement. “It is cool! It is amazing! I will cheer for your love! I will cheer, I promise! I will pray that your love will become—er, *come* true!”

“Th-thank you, Megmica.”

“You’re welcome!”

Meg let go of Sophia’s hands and began gesturing wildly in a way very foreign to Roxche, and probably even Sou Be-Il. “We will find them! We will find all the 50th’s bee! I’m sure there will be big caves in the ground! Perhaps it is the newest kind of bee only in our school no one knows yet! You will be resting easy, SC Sophia! We are very good at finding underground things!”

Meg’s Roxchean began degenerating.

“Huh? ...What?” Sophia’s eyes widened in confusion. Nick quickly stepped in.

“There’s no need for a possessive between ‘50th’ and ‘bee’, Megmica. And the word ‘bee’ refers to the buzzing insect that flies around collecting pollen.”

Meg was shocked.



“Pardon? Do not bees in Roxche make large caves under the grounds? If there are 50 bees, I thought they would make big holes under the grounds and crawl in lines.”

As Meg reeled in confusion, Natalia tilted her head. “I think you’re talking about ants, Megmica. They’re totally different. Did you learn the terms wrong?”

“Huh? Er...hm? This is...”

“Guys.” Jenny finally spoke up with a twirl of her pen, knowing they were getting nowhere. “In Bezelese, they use the same word to refer to both bees and ants. They’re both hymenopteras, and other than the wings, they have similar body structures. So in Bezelese, ‘flying bees’ are what we know as bees, and ‘crawling bees’ are ants. Usually people omit the first part, so you generally have to use context to figure out which insect they’re talking about.”

“Yes! That is true!” Meg exclaimed. “Thank you, Jenny. Now I know differences. ‘Ant’. My new Roxchean word for today.”

“Fascinating. Looks like I still have a lot to learn,” said Seron.

“Anyway, let’s get back to the point,” Jenny said, “SC Sophia, you want to help SC Arthur because you’re in love with him, right? You want him to acknowledge you. So you’re trying to find this ‘50th bee’ that he so desperately wants.”

“Yeah. I know this might be a little underhanded, but I think I might be able to tell him how I feel then. Or maybe not, but I have to try.”

“If you’ve come so far as to talk to us, you must be desperate.”

“Yeah. As long as I can tell him before the practice camp ends. By the last day...”

“I see. Then we have no time to lose. When does the camp end?” asked Jenny. Nick answered.

“The camp lasts seven days, and today is the fourth day. We have tomorrow, the day after, and the day after that—three full days in total.”

“That’s right.” Sophia nodded. “But there won’t be much of a practice on the last day. Just one full rehearsal, then cleanup and lunch and an afterparty at the dormitory cafeteria. We’ll be dismissed before evening—by this time that day, at the latest.”

Larry scowled. “So we really only have two days...”

“It might be tough to figure out this 50th bee,” said Natalia, “Me, Megmica, and Nick are tied up all day, and Seron and Larry probably can’t spare too much time. Jenny’s about our only free member.”

“Still.” Jenny slammed her notepad on her desk. “I am going to complete this request. Like our motto says, ‘assist all romantic endeavors’.”

Larry muttered something about getting yet another new motto. Jenny remained confident.

“This is going to be a challenge. But we’re gonna solve this by the last day of the training camp, SC Sophia. You can count on us!”

Meg rose to her feet and applauded. “You said something very cool, Jenny! I will help also!”

“Thanks, Jenny. Megmica. Sorry this was so sudden,” Sophia said. Jenny grinned.

“The newspaper club will never let its fans down.”

“Then let’s get started right away.”

“Thanks, everyone.”

Sophia left the club office first and headed for the dormitories.

It was just about time for practice to end on a normal day.

“Me and Megmica should be leaving about now. So what do we do?” asked Natalia.

Jenny turned from her place by the door with her head held high.

“What else? We act!”

“Like how?”

“Just go out there and do something. Nat, Megmica, Nick? I want you three here during lunch break. And Seron and Larry?”

“Hm?” “Yeah?”

Jenny pointed at the two, who had replied at the same time.

“I’m gonna need your full support from tomorrow on. The enemy will soon be upon us!”

“Sure, but who’s the enemy?” Larry asked dubiously.

Jenny did not miss a beat. “Love is war.”

“I don’t get it.”

“Lemme spell it out for you. Love makes people suffer. Sometimes it kills them. People can die for love. Please tell me your skull’s not thick enough for that to go over your head.”

Larry could not respond. He simply looked at Meg across the coffee table.

“Megmica.”

“Yes? What is the matter?”

“Could you translate that into Roxchean for me? Please.”

The newspaper club was dismissed.

“I want everyone to ask friends and family outside the school about this ‘50th bee’,” said Seron, “Maybe it’s a popular phrase on radio or TV, or a new product of some kind. Larry, Nick, and I will try to ask SC Arthur discreetly if we can. But make sure to keep SC Sophia’s feelings a secret. Try not to discuss it outside the office. We’ll report back tomorrow at lunchtime,” he explained in place of Jenny, who was bursting with enthusiasm but not much in the way of planning.

* * *

“Please excuse us first. —Ants crawl on the ground.”

“Don’t bother seeing us off. Good luck with the investigation.”

“I’ll bring spare keys for everyone tomorrow.”

The girls left through the gates, saying goodbye.

Seron, Larry, and Nick returned to the dormitory cafeteria and sat down at a table far from the drama club.

“Come on, why do they have to sit so far away?” “Are we not good enough for them or something? Ugh!”

Some of the girls fumed, frustrated that they never had the chance to speak to them.

“Maybe they’re just shy. Don’t be so angry at them,” Sophia tried to calm them down.

“Or maybe...the three of them are dating?” one of the third-years speculated, to screams of both horror and excitement.

As frenzied voices echoed through the cafeteria, Larry cut a piece of roast chicken—that day’s dinner menu—with a knife.

“So how’re we gonna make this plan of ours work?” he asked, deliberately being vague. Seron sat across from him, and Nick to Seron’s right.

Seron had also ordered chicken. He chewed on a piece as he replied, “Our first priority is to protect our client’s secret. We won’t hunt for information in the dorms. If you need to use the phone for our investigation, use the one in the club office. And we can’t discuss the issue in our rooms—the baths go without saying—in case one of them happens to hear. You can usually hear people talking in their rooms from the hallway. It’s best to keep all this information to the office.”

“Of course.” Nick nodded, placing a piece of steamed bass on a mushroom. He had gotten the other menu.

“Should we not talk about it here, then?” Larry asked. Seron nodded.

“Yeah. This might sound stupid, but someone might have good enough eyesight to lip-read what we say. We have to be careful. We can’t let anyone know,” Seron said gravely. Larry nodded, knowing how personal this had become to Seron.

“All right. But you know, I was pretty surprised when Jenny decided to help out.”

Nick agreed, “Indeed. Our investigation here isn’t particularly suitable for the papers, either.”

“Yeah,” said Larry, “Wonder if there’s a story behind that. Maybe she had a bad experience with romance— Actually, let’s drop this.” Larry stopped himself, thinking of Seron.

“All I can say now is that we should do our best,” Seron said, unaffected. He popped a piece of steamed carrot into his mouth.

Chapter 3: Research

The 11th day of the seventh month.

The fifth day of the practice camp began.

The clouds had grown thick overnight and formed a grey roof over the city. They flowed endlessly, pushed along by the powerful northerly winds.

The Capital District was famed for its cool summers, but when it became overcast the temperature dropped even more with no sign of rising anytime soon.

“It’s almost cold. Weather report says it’ll start raining this afternoon,” Larry said, walking to the gym in his tracksuit at the tail end of the line of umbrella-wielding drama club members. He was holding a black umbrella.

“It’s the perfect weather for catching cold,” Seron said. Larry tilted his head.

“It certainly is,” Nick chimed in without even blinking. “I feel perfectly fine, but it seems to me like the two of you may be coming down with something. Perhaps it’s because you left the window open overnight? It tends to happen if you stay in the bath too long and cool down too rapidly.”

“Nah, we closed—” Larry cut himself off, realizing what Nick was getting at. “Aha! You’re trying to get me and Seron to play hooky!”

“Yes. But please try to keep it down.” Nick smiled with a finger over his lips.

“Whoops. Sorry.”

“We could always try that excuse if it looks like we’ll have too much on our plates today and tomorrow. It’s not likely, since they’re almost finished with the set pieces and there’s not much to do with the props, but still,” Seron said. Larry nodded.

When they arrived at the gymnasium, they were greeted by Ms. Krantz and her endless enthusiasm. After exchanging greetings, she told the students that her mother was doing better and would be able to come see the fall performance.

Soon, the dozen-plus orchestra club members and the four chorus club members arrived.

Both Natalia and Meg were wearing cardigans over their uniforms, like the other girls. And both shook their heads when they stepped inside. Neither had turned up anything, Larry and Seron realized.

“Nothing, huh.”

“This is going to be a challenge.”

Practice began.

Like the previous day, the orchestra members tuned their instruments before the rehearsal. Drama club members who were finished with their work brought over chairs to watch the performance.

Because the less busy drama club members had brought in tea for everyone, all Seron and Larry had to do was open and close windows—which they did not have to do very much, as it was cool and overcast.

Break time finally arrived.

“All right. Let’s see if we can get some time off.”

Seron waited for Arthur to speak with Sophia alone before going over to him. He asked to take the rest of the morning off because he had other things to work on.

Completely oblivious, Arthur nodded. "Sure. No problem."

"Go ahead. You deserve some time off," Sophia said nonchalantly.

Finally, Seron and Larry received permission from Ms. Krantz to take the rest of the morning off. As they left the gymnasium, they looked at Natalia. Seron mimicked biting down on a sandwich and Larry opening up a newspaper.

* * *

"Are the spare keys ready yet?" Larry said the password.

"No one likes an impatient brat, Larry. And yes, they're ready." Jenny opened the door and let Seron and Larry inside. "You're early today. Are you skipping? Also, is it raining outside?"

"We got permission to take the morning off. And it's not raining yet, but it's a matter of time," Seron replied.

"All right. Take a seat. Want some lukewarm tea?"

"Sure. Thanks."

"Yeah!"

Seron and Larry sat down, when the latter noticed something.

"Hm?"

He spotted two long, thin paper bags lying atop Natalia's guitar case.

"She really brought them in, huh. You all right with this, Jenny?"

"With what?"

"Sooner or later she's going to turn this into a music room. What're you gonna do when she carries in a grand piano?"

"Hm. Maybe I'll tear down the wall and expand the place?"

"Seriously."

"I'll cross that bridge when I come to it. Here you go."

Jenny placed two cups of tea before them, then sat on a chair.

"Any results?"

"Nothing on our end. We haven't talked to Nat and Megmica, but they were both shaking their heads."

"Yeah. I asked my family and looked at newspapers and magazines, but no cigar. It's probably not a product name or some new show."

"I guess SC Sophia would have figured it out by now if it were that easy." Seron sighed, taking a sip from what had yesterday become his personal teacup. He complimented the flavor.

"So maybe it's something on campus after all?" Larry speculated.

"Yeah," Seron agreed.

"Wait, what if I ask my brother?" Larry wondered, taking to his feet. "He was here until four years ago. He should be on summer break now too, so he's probably at the dorms. I'm using the phone, Jenny."

“Sure. That’ll be 100 Roxes per—”

“Hey, this is part of official club activities.”

Larry went up to the telephone and picked up the receiver.

“Let’s see here...”

From his back pocket he pulled out his wallet and took out a scrap of paper, then began dialing.

Someone picked up. Larry straightened up instantly.

“Hello? My name is Larry Hepburn, secondary school student! I’d like to speak to my brother, Candidate Cato Hepburn! What? Oh... I see.”

Larry deflated quickly. And eventually—

“I understand. Thank you. Please excuse me...” he trailed off, hanging up.

“Well? Find out anything?” Jenny said sarcastically.

“Yeah... I found out my brother went out on an independent outdoor training camp with his classmates. They’re coming back in four days.”

“Diligent, huh.”

“Yeah,” Larry sighed, falling into the sofa.

“Should we consult Mr. Hartnett?” Seron offered.

“‘It doesn’t ring a bell. I have no idea. I’ll contact you if I find anything, but don’t expect results.’ I think he’s busy with a really big case right now,” Jenny replied. Larry pouted. Then,

“Hey, what about Leena?”

“Good idea.” Seron stood. Jenny asked if Leena was his girlfriend.

“My sister. I’m using the phone, okay?” Seron replied coolly, picking up the receiver.

Because he was making a long-distance call, he had to go through an operator. One of the maids soon picked up, and Seron asked to speak to his sister.

Leena finally picked up.

“It’s me. Are you all right to talk? We’re having a quiz competition at school right now, and we have to guess an object based on a mystery phrase. I was having a tough time, but I thought you might know,” Seron explained.

He gave her the term ‘50th bee’ and asked her if she knew anything, or if it reminded her of anything. But—

“All right... Thanks. Yeah, I’m doing well. It’s a lot of fun here. I’ll probably go back in three days, in the morning. Say hello to Mother for me, okay?”

He hung up.

“Nothing.”

Seron returned to the sofa, joining Larry.

“Looks like we’ll have to figure this out before camp ends, for my sake too.”

“We will. The easiest way, though...” Larry trailed off.

“Yeah.” Jenny nodded. “It’s to ask SC Arthur himself. We know that.”

Larry thought for a while, then looked up.

“Wouldn’t it be better to just have SC Sophia confess after all?”

“That would be the easiest way,” Seron agreed with surprising promptness. “But we can’t do that. That’s not what she asked us to do.”

“Yeah, but... what if we convince her to change her request?”

This time, Jenny responded. “That won’t be easy. You can lead a horse to water, but you can’t make it do butterfly strokes.”

“‘You can’t make it drink’, Jenny. ‘You can’t make it drink’.”

“Close enough.”

“In what language?”

“Anyway, here we have a client who finally decided to pick up the weapon called ‘courage’ to take a stand and fight. If someone asked you for a tank to fight against another tank with, Larry, would you tell them, ‘I can’t get you a tank, so here’s a gun’?”

“...No.” Larry shook his head.

“Although if that really were the case, I could provide one from the Jones Motors warehouses.”

“Hey! Those are supposed to go straight to the Army!”

“Sure are. You want one too?”

“As if. Tanks are a pain to maintain. Just thinking about taking care of one alone gives me migraines.”

“I could always hire a personal mechanic using club funds.”

“...Jenny. What are you planning to use the newspaper club as a front for?”

“Who knows? Maybe I’ll start by demolishing the photography club’s snobby little office.”

“If you ever decide to run for president, I am going to become an assassin, Jenny.”

Seron finished his tea and finally spoke.

“We’ll look around campus before it starts raining. Who knows? We might find something. We’ll also look for bees—not real ones, but things that resemble bees or remind us of them. We’ll also have to check out the gargoyles on the older buildings.”

“I’ll go too. The more eyes, the better.” Larry volunteered. Seron nodded.

“We’ll come back at lunchtime with everyone’s food, Jenny. We can have another strategy meeting then.”

“Right. Take these—I keep the door locked even when I’m in. Feel free to use the office even if I’m not here,” Jenny said, taking out two keys from her pocket and tossing them at Seron and Larry. They caught the keys.

“Now I feel like a real member. Thanks a bunch,” Larry said.

Jenny pointed at them. “Then here’s my order as president. Bring back results! I’m gonna kill you if you come back empty-handed.”

Seron and Larry took a step outside the building. The clouds had grown thicker and the sky darker.

“Dark clouds on the horizon, huh.”

“Don’t worry, it’ll be clear on the last day of camp. Anyway, what’s our strategy? Where do we start?” Larry asked. Seron stopped to think.

“...I’m not sure. We still have time before lunch, so let’s go around the campus and slowly head to the cafeteria.”

“Right.”

They began to walk.

On their way across the vast campus, they found several things.

Three honeybees near a flower bed.

A hundred and seventy-four ants, which was as far as Larry got before he gave up on counting.

Countless tiny insects, and the birds circling low overhead seeking an easy meal.

A bent tie pin someone must have dropped the previous term.

And three pieces of laundry that had flown over the campus walls from a nearby apartment building. A men's shirt, a pair of children's pants, and women's underwear.

* * *

"We're technically not empty-handed, though," Larry said, lightly shaking the paper bags in his hands. There were eight of them containing lunches for six. They had given the clothing they found on the grounds to the security guards at the gates.

For lunch, students had a choice between wild rice with chicken soup or fish burgers and chips. Seron and Larry elected to get burgers for everyone, as they would have needed separate containers for the soup.

The burgers and chips alone did not seem like enough vegetables, however, so they filled Larry's lunchbox with boiled carrots, peas, and corn from the salad bar.

"Definitely a challenge."

Seron was carrying in one hand a bag containing the lunchbox, a small packet of salt, and six forks. In his other hand was a black umbrella held over both himself and Larry. They walked side-by-side to the newspaper club office. The wind sometimes strengthened, scattering rain on their legs.

The sound of music was faintly drifting from the gymnasium.

"Well, at least Lia won't get mad about lunch being late," Larry remarked.

They entered the building.

"We're back."

Instead of giving a password, Larry opened the door with his own key.

Jenny was sitting on the sofa with an intense expression. She looked up.

"Anything? If not, I'll eat you alive head-first."

Larry held out one of the paper bags. "We didn't find a thing. But if you're that hungry, you'll probably prefer this to either one of us."

"...Hm. I forgive you."

* * *

It was almost noon. Seron was pouring boiling water from the kettle, and Larry was arranging paper bags, napkins, and forks on the coffee table.

"We're here. Open up." Natalia called from the hallway with a knock.

"Hm?" "Huh?"

Jenny and Seron furrowed their brows.

Larry, who was closest to the door, grinned. "Password? Make sure it's something nobody else knows, or it wouldn't be much of a password."

Natalia responded.

"In first year of primary school, we had this beautiful blond teacher. And on the class picnic, Larry—"

"NO!" Larry yelled, throwing the door open.

"Thanks." Natalia smiled. Larry was drenched in cold sweat.

"Lia...are you trying to kill me?"

"I'm not an executioner. Just a witness to history."

"They should make it illegal for childhood friends to reveal embarrassing secrets."

"Then make that your campaign promise, Larry. I was just answering a question."

"We're not working on a password system anymore, Lia. Get your key from Jenny."

"Good to hear. Too bad I already got mine this morning."

In Natalia's hand was a key with a red ribbon.

"Lia...but you..."

"Didn't you see the flutes?"

"Now that you mention it..." Larry trailed off, turning. Seron gave him an apologetic look as he poured tea into the cups.

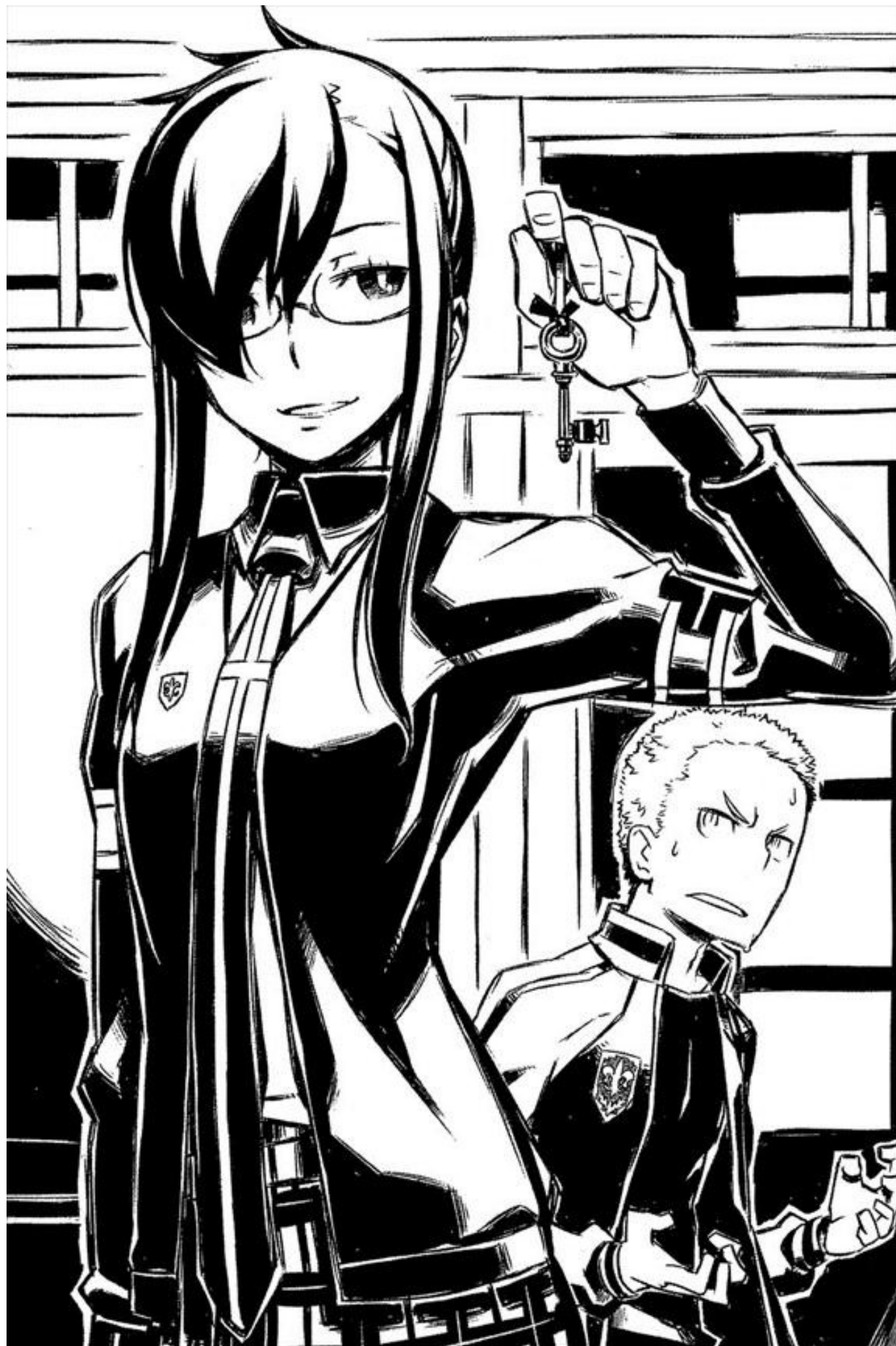
"I was going to remind you, Larry, but..."

Larry hung his head.

"Tsk tsk. You're going to lose a lot of good men on the battlefield if you can't think fast enough."

Larry could not respond.

"Wasn't that a nice lesson?" Natalia said, walking past him without so much as blinking.



Meg followed Natalia inside. "Hello, everyone."

And Nick followed Meg. "I'd love to hear the details, but I suppose it's not right to unearth a secret so desperately hidden. May I have my key, Jenny?"

Nick put three umbrellas into the stand by the entrance. Natalia took a seat.

"Thanks for the food. Any good news? Like, 'mystery solved! Job's done!'"

Seron replied as he brought over a tray laden with six cups of tea, "No. We're having fish burgers and boiled vegetables today."

"I see. We didn't find anything either, so let's dig in. Who do we pay?"

"It's my treat."

They all took their seats.

As usual, the boys sat on one side and the girls on the other. Seron and Meg sat in the middle of their respective sofas, and Larry was across from Natalia. Their places were more or less set in stone.

The students all prayed and began to eat.

Jenny took big bites out of her burger with her tiny mouth.

"It is very delicious," said Meg, "I was cold today, but thank you for boiling tea."

"That was Seron," said Larry. Meg nodded.

"Thank you for the tea, Seron. I will enjoy it."

"I-it's nothing. Don't mention it."

Meg chuckled.

Seron closed his eyes, moved nearly to tears. That was when Nick spoke up.

"Does anyone here know who this friend of SC Arthur's might be?"

No one answered. Nick continued.

"I suppose it might post some risk to ask that student after all. Then perhaps another person who might know him well? We may very well find a hint to solving this mystery."

Jenny, who was once again first to finish eating, replied, "I looked into it. I'll explain while you eat." She went over to the chair and picked up her notepad from the desk. "Arthur Sears, born on the 19th day of the second month of the year 3288. Age 17, president of the drama club. Fifth-year student, never held back. Just narrowly gets excellent grades. Enjoys theater, film, canoeing, skiing, cycling, and cricket. His favorite food is kidney pie. Favorite drink is ginger ale." Jenny recited.

"How did you get all that information?" Larry exclaimed.

"I asked a senior-classman yesterday. I can't say who it was, but my informant is a big fan of our activities."

"So you even have an intelligence network. I'm impressed, Jenny."

"Well we *are* the newspaper club."

"Right. What else?"

"His family runs Sears Patisserie, which has a 189-year history. Have you ever heard of them, Megmica?"

Meg replied with a carrot stuck at the end of her fork, "Yes, I do know Sears Patisserie. Guests gifted Sears cakes to our home, and I have eaten them several times. They brought

chocolate cakes, but the cakes were not too sweet and very delicious.” She then popped the carrot into her mouth and chewed.

Jenny looked at Meg—happy as she could be—and Seron—blankly but happily watching her—and continued.

“His home address is the same as Sears Patisserie—3 Ninth Street. He has a grandmother aged 69, a father aged 41, and a mother aged 45. His father is a patissier who married into the family. SC Arthur has a sister two years his senior, who chose not to inherit and instead works as a newbie fashion designer at Epstein. His younger sister is 13 years old and currently attends a specialty school for patissiers. SC Sears attended Eliza Knox Memorial Primary School near his home, and received top marks all six years. In fifth year he took second place in the primary school division of the Capital District Cross-Country Ski Competition. And he graduated as valedictorian. At the graduation speech, he said his dream was to become a respectable adult who would take over the family business and pass it on to the next generation.”

“That’s a lot of personal info. Your fan tell you all that?” Natalia asked, taking a bite out of her burger.

“No. I called the Sears marketing department and the primary school this morning.”

“I’m surprised they told you all that.”

“I told them that the 4th Capital Secondary School’s ‘official’ newspaper club was doing a story on the drama club. You know how their president last year was scouted by the Confederation Theater Company? I just told them that people have been curious about the drama club since then.”

“What the heck’s the Confederation Theater Company?”

Jenny explained how former president Joshua Dennis had been scouted and Arthur was suddenly thrust into his position.

“Hm... I see. So he wasn’t actually supposed to be the president.” Natalia nodded.

“It is a strange custom of Roxche,” Meg said gravely. Natalia quickly corrected her, saying this was unusual even in the East.

“Seron and I didn’t know any of this until SC Arthur told us in person. You’re pretty good, president!” Larry exclaimed. Jenny grinned.

“It’s easy to write about people who’ve left school,” she explained, “I was actually planning to say SC Joshua’d left because the school was haunted, but there were so many ghost-related stories I decided not to run it.”

“I take back what I just said.”

“Anyway, that’s all for Arthur Sears. Next is Sophia Ulericks. I don’t have as much info on her, since I didn’t have much time and we can always ask her in person. Vice-president of the drama club, fifth-year. Her family runs Ulericks Real Estate, which has its head office on Sarcey Avenue. It wasn’t hard to find, since her family name’s pretty uncommon. I had my personal driver check out the place, pretending to look for a room, and apparently the father told him a bunch of things when he heard about me. Sophia’s an only child, and her parents doted on her. Apparently she wants to become a lawyer, but her father hopes she’ll get married straight out of school and doesn’t mind if she doesn’t join the workforce.”

“We can help her to be married!” Meg suddenly cried.

“You’re quite the romantic, Megmica,” said Natalia.

“It is cool! I hope that this will definitely succeed! We can do this! Do our best! Hyah!” Meg clenched her hands and held them up like a child. Her pigtails fluttered.

“And one last thing of note. This is important.”

“What might that be?”

The other students had finished eating. All eyes were on Jenny.

“Sophia Ulericks was born on the 13th of the seventh month in the year 3288. In other words, her birthday’s the day after tomorrow. The last day of the practice camp.”

“I see. Now I understand,” Seron said.

“Huh?” Larry intoned, still in the dark.

“This explains why she is so intent on confessing to him on the final day,” Nick spelled things out for Larry.

“It’s a birthday gift to herself,” Natalia chimed in. “And she’s trying to work up the courage to say it. She must really like him.”

Meg applauded. “It is wonderful! Her love is great! Then on her birthday, we will gift her a boyfriend!”

“Well, that’s only if our investigation gets anywhere in the next two days,” Jenny said, closing her notepad.

“We will work more hard! Yes! It is a little—no, a large amount different than Mr. Hartnett’s words, but we can help someone who needs help!”

“You’re fired up.” Natalia grinned. “Looks like we’ll all have to kick things up a notch.”

Natalia referred to everyone, but looked directly at Larry.

Larry nodded. “That’s right! Seron, it’s all on us. I’ll do all the heavy lifting, so you take care of anything that needs brainpower!” He slapped Seron on the shoulder.

“Y-yeah... I’ll do my best,” Seron replied, and looked forward again—

“I will trust you alone, Seron! Work hard, Seron!” The girl before him beamed. He was instantly energized.

“...Right! I’ll find the answer to this mystery!”

“It’s good to be young,” Jenny muttered like an old woman. “Anyway, let’s go over this again. What is the 50th bee? Just toss out some ideas.”

Seron agreed. “Yeah. It doesn’t matter how stupid you think it might sound. I want to examine this case from every angle. The meaning doesn’t even have to match up with the meanings of the words ‘50th bee’.”

“May I begin? I had been struggling with an idea for some time now,” Nick said, raising a hand.

Jenny nodded, opening her notepad and picking up a pen.

“I personally find this quite unlikely, but...”

Unusually enough, Nick trailed off mid-sentence.

“It’s all right, Nick. We want as many opinions as possible,” said Seron.

“I suppose so. ...It occurred to me that SC Arthur may be involved in something of the unsavory sort,” Nick said without blinking. The others’ jaws dropped.

“SC Arthur? No way, he wouldn’t—” Larry began, but he cut himself off. “Sorry, Nick. I’ll let you finish.”

The others looked at Nick as well. He continued.

“This has nothing to do with Mr. Hartnett’s proposal the other day, but there are indeed individuals in this very school who are involved in shady business. Those who bully junior-classmen during club activities, extort others, or use their student status in order to hide illegal dealings. I doubt there are many in this school, but the number is almost certainly above zero. They are simply hidden below the surface. After all, everyone is bound to have secrets. And in SC Arthur’s case, perhaps his secret happens to be a somewhat—no, a *very* dangerous one. One that is potentially illegal.”

It was jarring to hear such words from such a beautiful face.

“Perhaps this was why he created a code word? This object he seeks might be something alcoholic. Stores would never sell to minors like us, but perhaps he has a friend whose parents run a liquor business and circulates products among them. Perhaps the 50th bee refers to a liquor that SC Arthur is desperate to get his hands on. Naturally, this is only an example. You could substitute ‘liquor’ with ‘tobacco’ or ‘drugs’ in this scenario.”

“I see. That’s a possibility, yes. ‘Would even sell your own parents for’... ‘fifth-years now’...” Seron recounted Sophia’s testimony.

“Hm.” “Maybe.”

Jenny and Natalia also nodded.

But Larry was completely unconvinced. He pouted in silence.

“What can happen in this case?” asked Meg.

“Perhaps something terrible, should we choose to uncover the mystery,” Nick replied.

“I...I suppose that is right.”

“Confessing to SC Arthur would become the least of SC Sophia’s problems. I highly doubt she would procure something illegal to give as a gift, especially as she wishes to become a lawyer. And what will happen to the fall performance if the club president is punished? In the worst-case scenario, we may require Mr. Hartnett’s assistance once more.”

“That doesn’t sound good,” Larry said.

“That is all for my speculation. But I would like to add that I doubt SC Arthur would do such a thing. He is an honest and upstanding student. The possibility is not zero, however, and we should be prepared for the worst as well.”

“All right,” Jenny said, looking up from her notes. “That was an interesting suggestion. You, Seron?”

“To be honest, I never considered the possibility. I’ll keep it in mind, just in case.”

“Thank you.”

Having darkened the atmosphere in one fell swoop, Nick placed a hand over his chest and took a bow.

“I’d like to hear another opinion,” said Seron.

“I’ll go,” Larry replied.

All eyes turned to him.

“Hate to say it, but I’m not as clever as the rest of you. So decided to go simple and thought maybe the 50th bee was the name of a role.”

Larry stopped there. Jenny urged him to continue with a twirl of her pen.

“Keep going.”

“As far as I know, SC Arthur’s a good guy. In both school and drama. A senior-classman from my military sciences course introduced him to me over lunch, and he couldn’t be any more honest and upstanding if he tried. So I don’t think the 50th bee is anything bad. Seron and Nick already heard, but SC Arthur’s not going to become an actor, even though he loves theater. He’s going to attend university and graduate school to study management. That means he can only act while he’s in secondary school. Did I get that right, Seron?”

“Yeah. He might join a drama club in university, but he says he wants to study management and take over the family business.”

“Then maybe what SC Arthur wants so badly is a role called the ‘50th bee’. I don’t know much about plays, though. Has anyone ever heard of a role like that? It might be a really minor character, but we might turn up something if we looked into it. That’s all for my suggestion.”

“Yes, yes. Maybe that is right,” Meg chirped.

Jenny, however, disagreed. “Sorry, Larry. But I think that’s even less likely than Nick’s scenario.”

“Hm.” Seron nodded reluctantly.

“It’s cool, Seron. Tell me why,” Larry said.

“All right. It’s not completely impossible, but if it has something to do with theater I think SC Sophia would have figured it out by now.”

“Ah! Makes sense. You’re right. This is why I don’t do mysteries,” Larry said brightly. “Next?”

“Er...may I speak?” Meg asked, raising her slender arm.

“Sure! Go right ahead.” Jenny pointed her pen at Meg.

“Yes. I thought that I could find an answer among things I know. So I thought that the sound ‘50th bee’ might sound like Bezelese. There are not many people whose Bezelese speaking is possible, but I was very surprised to hear Jenny and Mr. Hartnett, you see. I think SC Arthur may have also took the class.”

“I see. So does it sound like anything?” Natalia asked.

“Yes, it sounds like several things. It was embarrassed so I wanted to tell Jenny alone later, but this is a good chance so I will now.”

“All right. Tell us,” said Jenny.

“Sorry to butt in,” Larry said suddenly. “But wouldn’t Jenny have noticed if it really were in Bezelese?”

“My Bezelese isn’t that good. And besides—tell ‘em, Megmica.”

Jenny deferred to Meg, who seemed to have something to say. All eyes were on Meg again.

“Yes. There is a reason. There are many different Bezelese.”

“Huh?” Larry raised an eyebrow.

Meg explained, “Er...you see, no matter in what country you go in Roxche, Roxchean sounds almost the same, yes?”

Nick elbowed Seron. He jumped into the conversation.

“Yeah. Roxchean was created so it would be intelligible anywhere in the East, from Casna in the east to Iks in the west. We’re strictly forbidden to change pronunciations and meanings without reason.”

“But Bezelese is completely different. Bezelese is Sou Be-II’s common language, but in different places Bezelese is different. What is the word? Er...dialogue? Dialep? Dialek?”

“Hm? You mean ‘dialect’.”

“Yes! That is the right word! Thank you, Natalia. In Sou Be-II, there are many Bezelese dialects. In Sfrestus the capital, the royals and nobles use ‘proper Bezelese speaking’. It is the most elegant and most beautiful Bezelese. My friend Lillia speaks proper Bezelese speaking, so I was very shocked. Because I have a dialect.”

“Ah, so that’s what you meant. I was wondering what you were saying earlier,” Natalia said, recalling their conversation from four days ago.

“Yes. That is right. And when you leave Sfrestus and the dialect changes, sometimes the word will hear the same sound but the meaning is completely different. In one sentence, there are many different Bezelese.”

“Which is why even I can’t possibly know all the words it might sound like,” said Jenny. “The dictionary I use only records Sfrestus Bezelese.”

Everyone nodded.

“Then you mean there are words in different dialects of Bezelese that sound similar to ‘50th bee’?” asked Seron.

“Yes. There are many words. Let me start...” Meg trailed off.

She pulled out an envelope from her uniform pocket. It was folded neatly in half. When Meg unfolded it, her name and address, along with a stamp, came into view.

“You addressed it to yourself?” Natalia remarked.

“Yes. There is my letter inside, where I wrote the Roxchean meanings I found in the dictionary. Please wait a minute. I will open it.”

Meg began to tear open the sealed envelope.

“Why did you bring it in an envelope?” asked Nick. The answer came from Seron.

“The words you found must have been...unusual. You wrote them down for reference, but you didn’t want anyone to accidentally find it and look inside.”

“Yes, you are right,” Meg said mid-tear, “In this way, this letter will come back to me even if I drop it on the floor.”

“Hm.” “Not bad.” “I see.”

Nick, Natalia, and Larry were impressed. Meg shyly pulled out the contents of the envelope. But she did not read it.

“I am sorry... I hope someone will read this...”

“Then leave it to Larry,” Jenny said without missing a beat, “Larry? From now on, you’re the newspaper club’s head of public relations.”

“What the heck? Fine. Give it here, Megmica.”

“Yes...please read it.”

Larry unfolded the sheet of paper and scanned the page.

“Okay. First, ‘bomb explosion’.”



“Yes. They are the most similar words. It is sometimes used to simply say ‘bomb’ shortly,” Meg explained. Seron nodded in understanding.

“But...a bomb? I dunno,” Natalia said dubiously.

“Perhaps SC Arthur is a terrorist bent on the collapse of Roxche?” Nick suggested in jest. “And perhaps his friend happens to be a comrade in his cause.”

“As if, man! Next... ‘for pregnant women’. What’s this?”

“Er...to example, ‘this insurance is for pregnant women’. This is what it sounds like in that sentence,” Meg explained, growing even more quiet. “But I suppose this is wrong.”

Natalia sighed. There was a moment of silence.

Nick finally spoke up. “Perhaps SC Arthur got someone—”

“Let’s not go there, Nick!” Larry said quickly. Nick nodded.

“I suppose it’s not likely. Please, continue.”

“Right. ‘Stupid stupid!’”

Rather than explain, Meg personally shot down the suggestion. “I do not think it is right. They are words that children say in anger.”

“All right. Next. ...‘Inebriated’.”

Silence again. Natalia spoke.

“So it’s alcohol after all? Does SC Arthur secretly want to get completely and utterly hammered?”

Five seconds of silence followed. Larry waited for more reactions before reading the next item.

“Next is ‘sea cucumber’. Used in regions where sea cucumbers are eaten.”

Larry did not wait this time.

“Next is ‘hairy caterpillar’. Same idea as ‘sea cucumber’.”

Again, there were no reactions.

“Last one, guys. ...Huh? Hm? Ah, I get it. Ahem. ‘Open brackets. A derogatory word reserved for young women. Has a worse meaning than ‘prostitute’ or ‘promiscuous woman’. Used in the southwestern coastal areas of Sou Be-Il. Cannot be used on radio or TV. If used by a politician, public resignation is guaranteed. Rarely used to refer to men, in which case it becomes more insulting. Close brackets’.”

“I am sorry. I am sorry. It is a very, very awful word.” Meg shrank apologetically.

“What do you think, Seron?” asked Jenny.

“I hate to say it, but I don’t think any of these are likely.”

“I suppose that is right. I think so as well.” Meg shrank even more. “I am sorry... I have wasted everyone’s times.”

“Not at all,” Seron said immediately. Meg looked up.

Seron’s grey eyes and Meg’s black ones met.

“You did a great job, Megmica. Now we at least know that the 50th bee doesn’t have anything to do with Bezelese. Thank you.”

“Ah! Thank you, Seron!”

Larry folded the sheet of paper with a smile, his eyes on the beaming Meg and the stunned Seron.

“All right, who’s next? Natalia?”

Natalia nodded.

“I think the 50th bee might not be code for something else.”

“Hm.” Larry intoned. Seron furrowed his brow.

“That certainly is an original suggestion. So what do you propose?” asked Nick.

“Maybe he just used an uncommon word like it was a common one. Like, there’s a lot of musical terms you’d never get unless you studied. Anyone know what sul ponticello is?”

“No.” “What’s that?” “Not a clue, I’m afraid.”

The boys shook their heads.

“I do not know either,” said Meg, “Is this a Roxchean word?”

“The pronunciation doesn’t sound Roxchean,” Jenny replied. “What does it mean?”

“It’s a violin technique. When you play sul ponticello, it means you’re playing with the bow close to the bridge. —The bridge is the piece that supports the strings, FYI. If you play it like this, it sounds rough and metallic. Sul ponticello is a really old term, but normally people just shorten it to sul-pon. ‘He says I have to play sul-pon’. ‘She goes completely sul-pon when she’s mad’—which means she sounds like nails on chalkboard.”

The others were impressed. Natalia adjusted her glasses.

“So I thought SC Arthur might have used some obscure jargon in a normal setting. I’m even more sure now that I know SC Arthur has a lot of hobbies. He wasn’t trying to hide anything in the conversation. Maybe ‘50th bee’ is a technical term, or something that sounded like it to SC Sophia, who doesn’t know what it is. I’d say the second option’s more likely.”

“I see. Makes a lot of sense. There’s a lot of military jargon we use all the time, but not a lot of people understand them,” Larry said.

“That is incredible. I did not think that way at all,” Meg agreed.

“C’mon. It’s just a possibility,” Natalia said, embarrassed.

Jenny stopped taking notes and pointed at Seron. “Well? Any comments?”

“None,” Seron said coolly. Jenny grinned.

“I heard you knew a lot about everything. Must be frustrating to hear there’s a word even you haven’t heard of.”

Seron remained silent for a time. He was as good as acknowledging Jenny’s jab. Soon, he looked up at the wall clock.

“Lunchtime’s almost over. There’s no guarantee we can come back here in the evening, which means we won’t be able to meet until tomorrow at lunchtime.”

Everyone but Jenny was shocked to see so much time had passed.

“I want the girls to keep researching at home. Jenny, I want you to look into newly-coined words.”

Everyone nodded. Seron continued.

“Nick, report to SC Sophia. Be honest with her and say we haven’t found out yet.”

“Of course. When would be the best time, do you think? Before or after afternoon practice? It might put her at ease to tell her earlier, but I suppose that also may make her worry even more.”

“I don’t know. Just be tactful and try to read the atmosphere. Also, make sure to tell her we’re still on the case.”

“Of course.” Nick nodded.

“What about us?” asked Larry.

“I’m going to look more into technical terms.”

“And how’re you gonna do that?”

“I’ll sign out books from the library. I’ll ask Mr. Jobs to open up the library after practice. I’ll bring the encyclopedia set and books related to the history and rules of the sports SC Arthur enjoys back to our room.”

“Wait, you mean those huge encyclopedias? And all the sports-related books? That’s crazy.”

“Which is why I need your help. We’ll probably need a hand cart if we want to carry everything from the library to the dorms.”

“All right! That’ll be my workout for the day. But what are you gonna look for?”

“I’ll read all the books and look for anything pronounced like ‘50th bee’, or something similar. Or anything that might be shortened to it. I’ll have to look hard.”

“Man...that’s gonna be rough.”

“Yeah. But one all-nighter’s not gonna kill me,” Seron said, smiling for once.

“It will be hard work, but do your best! We will gift SC Sophia her boyfriend!”

Seron heard Meg’s voice from across the table. He nodded, returning to his usual stoic look.

“Then let me help! I’m real good at pulling all-nighters!” Larry cried. But Seron shook his head.

“No, Larry. We need at least one of us to be able to help out at the drama club tomorrow. And even I’ll have a tough time reading through all these books, so this will be more efficient.”

“I see. I guess I might end up getting in your way. All right, I leave this to you.”

“And if you and Nick could try and talk to SC Arthur—”

“Yeah! We’ll keep an eye out—” “—And we will try to ask him in person,” Larry and Nick replied. Seron nodded.

“Dismissed. Everyone, we’ll meet back here tomorrow at lunchtime.”

Chapter 4: Seron's Dream

The five students made their way through the worsening rain and returned to the gym. Seron went in with Larry and Nick, and Natalia and Meg followed separately.

Afternoon practice grew heated and even stricter. They stopped for a break halfway through and finally finished much later than the usual dismissal time.

The orchestra and the chorus club left ahead. Natalia and Meg gestured to Seron and Larry to do their best as they disappeared into the evening rain.

Once the drama club was dismissed, Seron and Larry hurried to the faculty office without Nick.

And on the way,

"Say, Seron."

"Yeah?"

"I wonder what happened to Mr. Murdoch."

"Hm. I was so happy about Megmica that I'd completely forgotten. I'm curious too. Maybe Jenny heard something from Mr. Hartnett?"

"Makes sense. I should ask her sometime."

They entered the office.

Mr. Jobs from the social studies department was on duty. He was a man in his late thirties, who mainly taught geography.

Poor Mr. Jobs had been torn from his long summer vacation and back to work, left to read alone in the large office.

He was tall with a slender build and wore round glasses. Ever indifferent, he showed no qualms about Seron's request.

"You want to use the library? Sure. But you won't have a lot of time."

"I'm not going to be reading inside, sir. I'd like to check out some of the books. There's something I simply have to look into. I'd also like to borrow the encyclopedia set for one night. May I take them back to my dorm room?"

"Hm... You need the librarian's permission to check out the encyclopedias, but there's no one there right now. ...Well, you're an honor student. I suppose I could give you permission."

"Thank you, Mr. Jobs!"

The library was a large building separate from the others, and was home to a massive number of books. Luckily for Seron and Larry, it was close to the dormitories and was connected to it by a roofed walkway.

The library was practically Seron's second room. If he wasn't in the dorms, he was bound to be here.

Seron and Larry stepped in through the door Mr. Jobs unlocked.

"Next."

Seron knew where almost everything was. He quickly picked up the books he needed and loaded them into the cart Larry was pushing.

By the time he was done, two whole carts had been filled.

"That's quite the load you're taking along. Do be careful on the way back," Mr. Jobs said as he locked up and left.

The carts were so heavy that Seron and Larry had to push one cart together across the walkway, then come back for the other. And once they were at the dormitory building, they were faced with the task of carrying the books all the way up to the third floor. Seron reached for the encyclopedias.

“Wait. I’ll take care of this,” Larry said, “I’ll carry the books upstairs, so you watch the carts.”

“But—”

“You’ve got a long night ahead of you, buddy. You’ll need all your strength. I’m just doing what I can to help.”

“...All right. Thanks, Larry.”

“Just leave it to me!”

Larry hefted as many books as he could into his arms and slowly made his way up the stairs. Then he ran back to the cart and carried yet another armful of books upstairs.

Several repetitions later, Larry’s T-shirt was drenched.

“I’m still good to go!” he said nevertheless, putting on his usual smile.

Seron stood by the carts, watching Larry make the trip again and again.

Once the books were in their room, Seron and Larry took a quick bath and went to the cafeteria for dinner.

When they stepped inside, they spotted Nick eating next to Arthur—separate from the rest of the drama club. They were talking about something, gesturing often. Nick noticed Larry and Seron, but continued the conversation.

“Looks like he’s on a roll.” “We can leave SC Arthur to Nick,” Larry and Seron remarked, sitting down even further from the rest of the club.

For dinner they had a choice between beefsteak patties with vegetables or spaghetti in white sauce. Seron and Larry elected for the latter.

“Seron, you’re gonna pull an all-nighter?”

“Yeah, probably.”

“Got anything to chow down on overnight?”

“It’d be nice if I did.”

“Hold on a sec.”

“Huh?”

“Be right back.”

Larry took off and grabbed two hot dog buns from the all-you-can-eat bread section. He also picked out two beefsteak patties and some vegetables, cheese, and seasonings from the salad bar.

Then he cut the buns in half, spread butter on the inside, and toasted them quickly before inserting the patties in halves and the vegetables.

“There. Here’s your Hepburn-style sandwiches!”

Larry carefully wrapped up the sandwiches in the bags the hot dog buns came in, separately from the cheese.

“Snack on these if you get hungry. Just put the cheese inside and warm ‘em up back here in the cafeteria.”

“Thanks, Larry. I really appreciate it,” Seron said, receiving the sandwiches. Larry grinned.

“That looks scrumptious. Have you got any for me?” Nick asked, approaching their table.

Seron and Larry looked up to see that Arthur was leaving the cafeteria. The other drama club members were nowhere to be seen.

“Anything?” Larry asked as Nick sat next to him.

Nick shook his head. “We had a wonderful conversation about theater.”

“I see.” Larry was disappointed. Seron remained as stoic as ever.

“But something did seem strange to me. Permit me to discuss this here, as the drama club is gone and this may be urgent,” Nick said, lowering his voice. Seron and Larry gave him their full attention. “Just now, the topic of my birthday happened to come up. So I took the chance to ask SC Arthur if he knew that SC Sophia’s birthday was the day after tomorrow.”

“Good going, Nick!” “And?”

“It seems that he was aware of the fact. ‘I want to do something for her, but I’m a bit too busy right now,’ he said to me. Not a particularly insightful answer. It seems the drama club is planning a celebration for her at the afterparty. In any case, I pursued the topic further and asked SC Arthur what he wanted for his own birthday—if he had something he truly wanted.”

“Yeah!” “What did he say?”

“Well, that was the curious part,” Nick said gravely.

“What do you mean?” asked Seron.

“How would you two answer?” Nick asked.

“If I could ask for anything? A motorcycle or a car.”

“Books. Or a bookstore gift card.”

“Yes, that’s generally how people would answer that question.”

“Then you mean—”

“That’s right, Seron. SC Arthur began to speak faster, his attitude changing. ‘Nothing,’ he said to me, stuttering. And that was the end of it. I’d never seen him so flustered.”

“Hm...” Larry groaned.

Seron thought in silence.

“It couldn’t be...” Nick began.

Larry knew what he was thinking. “You want to say that your guess back in the office might have been right.”

“Yes. What do you think, Seron?”

“It’s looking more likely.”

“I see. Then what is our course of action?”

“Pray that I’ll find the answer in the library books tonight.”

“I understand. That is all for my report.”

* * *

“All right. Let’s get started.”

Seron was sitting at his desk in the dorm room.

On the desk was a brand-new notebook and pens and pencils.

Around the desk were piles upon piles of books.

The encyclopedias had been spread all around the room because they were so heavy that they made the floor squeak underneath. There was also a T-shirt under each pile of books to keep them clean.

“Good luck!” Larry cheered, climbing into his bed and getting ready to sleep.

It wasn’t yet bedtime, but Larry pulled his sheets over himself.

“I’ll sleep early and get up early. Wake me up at sunrise.”

“Got it,” Seron replied. Larry closed his eyes and put a towel over his eyelids.

And with surprising promptness, he began to snore softly.

Seron turned back to his desk.

“All right.”

He opened up ‘Canoeing for Beginners’.

* * *

The twelfth day of the 7th month.

It was before dawn on the morning of the sixth day of the practice camp.

The first thing Larry saw when he opened his eyes was the ceiling, lit dimly by the morning sun.

The next thing he saw was the pile of books stacked near the foot of his bed.

The next thing he saw was Seron, sitting at the desk in the same position as the one Larry had seen him in the night before.

A thick book was spread on the desk before Seron. His hand quietly turned the page.

“Hey, Seron. I’m awake now...” Larry said, half-asleep.

“Morning already...?” Seron replied, slowly turning around.

“Huh?”

The face that greeted Larry had red eyes with dark circles underneath. It was almost ghostlike.

“Hey...you all right, buddy?” Larry asked, completely awake. Seron lightly tilted his head and replied in a half-moan,

“I dunno. But that’s not important.”



“Wh-what in—? Is that you, Seron?”

That was the first thing Nick asked when he approached the table and Seron turned to look at him.

“Yeah... I think so. Morning,” Seron replied lethargically. Nick sat across from him.

“You certainly don’t appear to be the same Seron as the one I met yesterday. I’d heard you stayed up all through the night. Are you feeling all right?”

“My eyes hurt a bit...my throat feels kind of dry. I have a slight headache...but I’ll be fine once I have some food. Larry’s midnight snack was a big help too,” Seron replied, mechanically shoveling cereal into his mouth.

“Seron, you seem to my eyes more corpse than man. —Larry?” Nick turned, giving Larry a pointed look.

Larry shook his head.

“Gimme a break, Nick. I tried to stop him. More than once, too. I woke up at dawn, but Seron wouldn’t stop reading for hours after. He was glued to the books until just before we came down to the cafeteria.”

“...And did you find anything, Seron?”

“I made it through the encyclopedias and the rulebooks, but I didn’t find anything. But...”

“But?”

“I still have more books to go. Biographies of famous athletes, international competition records, stuff like that to look over until afternoon. Sorry Larry, but you go to practice without me. I’ll join you in the afternoon...”

Nick gave up on trying to convince Seron. He stood without even touching his breakfast.

“Larry, may I have a word?”

“Sure. Take your time, Seron. And make sure to have some fruit too!”

Nick and Larry walked away from Seron, who continued to scoop food into his mouth. They stopped by the cafeteria wall and quietly whispered to one another.

“What a terrible state. He looks like a dead man walking. I wasn’t aware that Seron had a doppelgänger.”

“I don’t think he took a single break overnight. He even had the sandwiches cold in our room.”

“This is too much. Staying up a single night should not tire anyone out to that extent. We must make him rest today.”

“You think I haven’t tried? I said I’d go to practice alone and he could get some sleep, but he won’t listen. He wouldn’t listen at all.”

“Then it seems that he is intent on continuing until the afternoon. Even if he finishes early, he may return to the library for more books. He could easily drive himself to unconsciousness.”

“Yeah... So this is what happens when a hardworking guy with a long attention span gets to work, huh.”

“This is no time to be impressed, Larry.” Nick sighed. “I have an idea.”

Nick's green eyes looked into Larry's blue ones.

"After breakfast, we will take Seron to the newspaper club office, telling him we should report to Jenny before practice. We have no idea what he may do if we leave him in the dorm room with the books."

"Right." Larry nodded. "But what're we supposed to do then? Seron's gonna insist on coming back. We can't exactly knock him out."

"Desperate times call for desperate measures. There is a Dezer Pharmaceuticals first-aid kit in the office, yes? It should contain headache pills. We will have Seron take the medication."

"Huh? Yeah, that does put you right to sleep. But Seron would never take it in a million years." Larry pointed out.

"That will not be a problem," Nick said with an elegant smile. "We can simply break it apart and put it in his tea."

* * *

"It was an emergency. We didn't have a choice," Larry sighed, looking up at the sky.

He was sitting on a bench on the rooftop of the building that housed the club office. The concrete floor was still dotted with wet patches.

Next to him was Nick, and three girls in uniform.

The newspaper club members sans Seron were eating lunch on the rooftop. The sky was a clear blue, and there was a gentle breeze in the air.

"You spiked his tea?! That's pure evil, Nicholas Browning. I approve." Natalia nodded. She had gobbled down her hot ham & cheese & truffle sandwich, and was opening up a second one.

"Thank you," Nick replied. Larry sighed.

"What's up, shortie?" asked Natalia.

"I just... I'm such a loser. I'm supposed to be his friend. I should have stopped him before he went to far."

"Like we didn't know that," Natalia agreed firmly.

"Heh heh heh..." Larry looked up at the sky with a bitter smile.

"Look, Larry Hepburn. You're only 15. It's okay as long as you don't make the same mistake with your subordinates when you're 25."

"...Yeah! You're right." Larry grinned, and dug into his sandwich with gusto.

"If that is the case, is Seron now sleeping?" Meg asked. She had only taken a couple of bites of her food. Jenny, who had wolfed down her sandwich in the blink of an eye, answered.

"He crashed mid-sentence the second he had the tea. He's probably still snoozing on the sofa."

"I understand... It is a relief in any case," Meg said weakly.

"I bet it's real comfortable on that pricy sofa. I should try sometime," Natalia commented.

Jenny thought for a moment. Then, "I could bring in a bed for the office. But then I'd have to expand the place."

“Hey, we don’t need an expansion!” Larry cut in. “If we didn’t promise to keep everything a secret, we would have taken Seron to the infirmary by now.” He rolled up the empty paper bag from his first sandwich and reached for his second.

“Erm! Is it the fault of mine? Because I said to Seron, ‘do your best’? I pushed Seron so much?”

Larry froze. He could not bring himself to nod.

Instead, he quietly tightened his grip on the paper bag.

“Not at all, Megmica,” Nick reassured her, “Seron is diligent to begin with; I’m quite certain he would have taken this task upon himself regardless.”

Natalia nodded. “Yeah. No one ever tells someone, ‘that’s enough working hard’, y’know? Don’t let it get to you, Megmica. You gotta save your energy for chorus club; eat up, or you’ll end up like Seron!”

“Yes…”

Downcast, Meg returned to her sandwich.

“Anything?” Jenny asked. And she answered her own question before anyone else could. “I didn’t find a thing. No news so far.”

Everyone was silent. Jenny understood.

“I see. Looks like we might not be able to finish the mission in time. Nick, did you get any new info from the client?”

“I’m afraid I didn’t. We’ve both been completely focused on practice over the past two days—it’s a very important performance, and SC Arthur and SC Sophia have many more lines and scenes than I do.”

“I see. Could you tell her to come to the office after practice today?”

“Of course. I’ll make sure she drops in, even if she has to have dinner late.”

“Thanks. I’m going to leave campus for a bit today.”

“Got it.” Larry nodded. “Leave the rest to us. Good luck.”

Natalia asked where Jenny was going. Nick responded.

“The Grand Theater, where the Confederation Theater Company is. Jenny made an appointment last night to interview the former drama club president there.”

“I get it! So that’s why you’re in uniform. Good going, president,” Natalia said, impressed.

“I’ll take care of Seron,” said Larry, “I’m sure he’ll be up by dinnertime. I’ll explain the situation to him and make sure he gets something to eat.”

Quietly, Meg sat frozen with her gaze on her half-eaten sandwich. She looked up.

“Please excuse me! I will!”

“Huh? What is it, Megmica?”

“I will stay in the office, Larry. I will look over Seron. You are to help at the practice, Larry. You were so busy in the morning, you told me. So don’t be hooky. Ms. Krantz will say, ‘I can’t believe all two helpers are resting!’”

Larry’s jaw hit the floor. Natalia, Nick, and Jenny maintained silence. Meg looked around at them all.

“Please leave it to me! I may look like this, but I have two younger brothers!” she declared.

“Er...well then...” Larry stammered looking around tentatively. “I guess...it’s up to you, Megmica?”

No one objected.

After lunch break, Jenny set off with a large single-lens reflex camera.

Natalia, who had made a good impression on the rest of the chorus club, volunteered to explain the situation to them. And Meg headed to the office.

“Take good care of him, Megmica. If the blanket slips off, pull it back over him.”

“Please take care of Seron. Perhaps wipe his forehead if he begins sweating.”

“You don’t have to go that far. Just make sure to clock him over the head if he decides to get back to work again.”

Larry, Nick, and Natalia left for the gymnasium, each tossing her a piece of advice.

* * *

Meg opened the door.

And she quietly stepped inside.

Seron was asleep on the sofa.

Light seeped in through the white lace curtains, filling the office with a faint glow.

He was facing up, with one rolled-up blanket under his head and a pink one covering his body. It was slipping off. Meg closed the door, tiptoed her way over, and stared into Seron’s face.

The dark circles under his eyes had grown fainter, but were still visible. Meg sighed.

“I’m sorry, Seron. I know everyone was just trying to be nice, but I could see it in Larry’s eyes. It’s my fault,” she said, slowly taking a seat and pulling the blanket up to Seron’s chest. “So I’ll take care of you while you rest. Sleep well.”

Meg smiled at Seron’s sleeping face.

Then, she walked around the coffee table and sat at her usual seat on the opposite sofa with a long sigh.

When Meg stopped moving, the room was silent.

The ticking clock grew louder and louder, overlapping with the sound of Seron’s breathing.

“What a comfortable sound...”

Meg lost herself in the ambience—

She closed her eyes, and did not open them for a long time.

Meg was asleep.



* * *

The gymnasium.

“Here’s your tea, everyone! Grab a cup and get in line!”

The orchestra club was on break. Larry handed out empty cups to the members with a smile on his face.

Natalia reached out.

“Here, Lia.”

“You call that customer service? Do I not deserve a smile just like the rest of the orchestra?”

“Never mind. Just take it already.”

“Sure. Thanks.”

That was when someone came up to them.

Larry and Natalia noticed simultaneously and shot her cautious looks.

“Have I done something illegal, now?”

Standing there was the golden-haired empress of the orchestra club, Lena Portman.

“N-not at all, SC Portman. Here’s your cup.”

“Thank you.” Portman took the cup with an elegant hand. “I wanted to ask you something.”

To Larry and Natalia’s surprise, Portman did not leave. In fact, she threw them a question.

“Huh?”

“What’s it to you, SC Portman?”

SC Portman’s response floored them both.

“Megmica Strauski from the chorus club was absent, was she not? I heard she felt unwell and went to the infirmary.”

“That’s right,” Natalia said curiously. Larry frowned.

“I’ve seen you and Megmica together after practice over the past few days, Natalia.” Portman said plainly, crossing her arms. “You haven’t been keeping her out too late? She’s not ill, is she?”

“Don’t worry. She’s just feeling a bit anemic,” Natalia replied with a ready-made lie.

“I see. Then I suppose it’s all right,” Portman admitted. She shot Natalia a glare. “Natalia.”

“Yes?”

“Tell her to take care of herself.”

“Huh? R-right.”

“It would be a shame if such a lovely voice were to be harmed—it would be a loss for the entire school! Make sure you tell her.”

“Sure, SC Portman. I’ll tell her you’re worried sick.” Natalia grinned.

“Wh-! Natalia! You could stand to be less offensive!”

Larry gaped as Natalia continued her attack.

“There you go again, SC Portman. You could just admit that you like Megmica. Everyone knows your bowing gets prettier when we’re playing with the chorus club.”

“Not at all. That would be my talent shining through.”

“No one’s arguing your once-in-a-century genius, SC Portman—”

“E-enough! Just make sure you tell her what I said! Please!”

“Sure. —Oh right, since you’re probably going to invite her to your house party next time, I’ll tell her in advance for you. When do you suppose it’s gonna be?”

“Wha—? No! I will not!” Portman fumed, walking away in a huff.

“She’s an open book.” Natalia snickered, watching her leave.

“Man...” Larry sighed, finally breaking his silence. “Anyway, you think they’re gonna be okay?”

“Don’t worry, shortie. I doubt either of them would get up to anything,” Natalia said with a wink.

Larry met her gaze.

“I know that. That wasn’t what I meant.”

* * *

The alarm went off.

“Oh!”

Meg looked up, her pigtails swishing. Her eyes opened. And the first thing she saw was Seron, who was slowly getting up.

“Oh, have you waken, Seron?”

But Seron did not answer. With his eyes still shut he slowly sat up and leaned against the back of the sofa. He stretched his legs forward, burying himself in the sofa and going still with his head on the sofa. When Meg realized that he was still asleep, she reached for the blanket that had fallen off him.

“...I can’t reach. I’m not as tall as Natalia.”

Because the coffee table was in the way, Meg had to walk around it to pick up the blanket. She stepped away from Seron and lightly shook it off. Then she quietly pulled the blanket over him as he slept.

The seats to either side of Seron were empty.

“I will stay awake now. I will look over you well,” Meg whispered, taking a seat to his left.

And she looked to her right, at Seron’s profiled face.

A strand of hair had fallen over his left eye. Meg slowly reached out towards him.

And quietly, gingerly, she tucked the strand behind his ear.

“Thank goodness...”

The dark circles under Seron’s eye had lightened even more. They were almost gone.

“You’re so handsome, Seron. But you won’t be popular with the girls if you go around looking so exhausted,” Meg advised with a smile.

Like before, she whispered in a language Seron wouldn’t understand even if he were awake.

Meg slowly looked around the office.

And she let her gaze linger over every last detail.

She stared at the sofa she had been sitting on earlier, and the one she was sitting on now—the exorbitantly expensive 3-seaters that Jenny had brought in.

Then she looked at the guitar case on the floor and the two flute cases atop them.

Then at the closet and the beautiful photos of the flower beds Jenny had taken, displayed next to it.

At the desk and chair, absent of their occupant.

The glowing lace curtains.

And the slightly-open window and the clear blue sky beyond.

“What a strange feeling...”

Meg whispered to herself.

“Right now I’m sitting cross-river, thousands of kilometers from home. Looking up at the sky so far from the land where the princess lives. Even though the sky looks exactly the same here.”

The sound of a foreign language filled the club office.

“Every day, I stumble my way through in broken Roxchean. Every day, I eat delicious Roxchean food. And every day, I have so much fun. I’m sure I’ll miss it so much when I go back home someday. I’m sure I’ll look back on Seron and the newspaper club like I’ll look back on Lillia and the chorus club.”

Meg turned her gaze then, from the sky to the younger boy sleeping next to her.

“...And I can’t believe I’m alone in a room with such a good-looking boy. The old me would be scandalized if she could see me now,” she said, and smiled.

The blanket slowly began to slip off of Seron again.

“Ah.”

Meg leaned forward and caught the blanket before it touched the floor. She pulled it up to her chest and sat upright.

Seron fell to his left. His hair touched Meg’s slender shoulder.

“Hm? Oh...”

Meg gasped, clutching the blanket in her hands. She felt something heavy on her right shoulder. Seron’s head.

“Ah...”

Meg turned her head to her right and looked into Seron’s face. She asked in Roxchean,

“Er...Seron? Are you really awake now?”

There was no answer.

“Er...do not make the older me angry?”

There was no answer.

“Er...I guess no one’s watching. And the old me certainly isn’t, either. I guess it’s all right.”

Meg’s eyes narrowed as she pulled the blanket over Seron’s chest with her left hand. She looked forward, letting Seron rest on her shoulder. The light spilling onto Natalia’s flutes slowly shifted away.

Time passed in silence. The minute hand began counting down to the next hour.

“Mm...”

Seron trembled, exhaling.

Meg slowly turned and looked down at Seron’s face.

The dark circles were gone and the usual Seron Maxwell was back. But there was an upset look on his face. He was grimacing.

“Ugh...”

At times his face twitched and he sighed.

“Seron?” Meg called to him hesitantly.

Seron’s breathing grew harsh as though he were feverish, and his eyes were clearly moving rapidly under his eyelids. And suddenly, he twitched and sat upright. The blanket fell to the floor.

“...Are you all right, Seron? Is there a fever?”

Meg reached out towards his forehead—

“Ah.”

Seron opened his eyes. His pupils shrank as light hit his grey eyes. Meg was quick to speak.

“Are you all right, Seron? It seemed like you were dreaming a nightmare.”

Seron slowly turned his head.

“I”

He was face-to-face with Meg, who was trying to look into his face.

“I’m okay,” he replied quickly, “Yeah. I’m fine,” he declared.

“Are you sure that you are fine? Please do not work too hard.” Meg smiled when she heard Seron’s cool voice. “Anyways, it is a relief. Were you not too cold in your sleep? Does your neck itch or your head ache?”

Seron raised a hand and wiped the sweat from his face.

“...Yeah. I’m fine. Thank you. I must have dozed off just now...what time is it?”

“It is almost the time for practice to end,” Meg replied.

Seron stared, wide-eyed. When his gaze fell on the wall clock, a grave expression rose to his face.

“No... I—this morning, I was supposed to—”

“No!” Meg cried suddenly. Seron fell silent.

Slowly, he turned his gaze from the clock to her.

Right next to him was Meg’s face, a hint of guilt in her eyes.

“I am sorry, Seron!”

“Huh?”

“I was like a child to you, Seron. I leaned on you too much. I am sorry if you worked too hard because of me.”

“...No, don’t worry about it.”

“I am sorry.”

“Y-yeah...”

Meg suddenly grew solemn.

“But Seron, I wish to tell you one more thing. Please do not work so hard now. You worked too hard yesterday night. So no one woke you up because you fell asleep here.”

Seron was silent.

“You made everyone worry for you. So tell everyone that you are sorry to them. Please do.”

“...All right. I made everyone worry, huh. I’m sorry, Megmica,” Seron said, and hung his head. “I’ll apologize to the others too.”

Seron looked up. Meg was beaming.

“Are you not hungry, Seron? Are you not thirsty? We left over some lunch. I will brew the tea now!”

Seron washed his face at the sink.

“Here, please eat this.”

And he did as Meg told him, eating the now-cold hot sandwich.

“And please drink this.”

“Oh...thanks.”

And he slowly sipped his tea.

Once he had finished his sandwich, Meg poured more tea for him.

“As expected, people should not work too hard. Do not work too hard. Please, Seron Maxwell, do not work too hard. Okay?”

After three repetitions of ‘do not work too hard’ and an affectionate call of his name—

“Oh, right...yes, of course.”

Seron suddenly found himself being more polite.

Chapter 5: A Role

“Hey there, Seron. We finished early today. How’re you feeling?” Larry asked, stepping into the office. Seron was deep in thought on the sofa.

“A lot better, thanks. I got plenty of rest. Sorry for worrying you,” he said, getting to his feet. Larry put on a smile and waved it off.

“Seron is all fine now!” Meg chirped, turning her head as she washed the teacups and teapot.

“...I see. Thanks, Megmica,” Larry said, falling into silence as he thought to himself, *‘It almost looks like I’m visiting a couple of newlyweds,’* and thanked her.

“This is good timing, Larry. I will brew tea for everyone. Seven will be enough, yes?” Meg smiled, filling the teapot with water.

“Awake now, Seron?”

“Ah, back to the Seron we all know and love.”

Natalia and Nick remarked as they entered the office. They were soon followed by Sophia.

“Hey there.”

Sophia and Nick sat down and sighed loudly, almost in unison. They exchanged looks and smiled.

“That was exhausting. Don’t you agree, SC Sophia?”

“Yeah...but we did such good work today.”

“I foresee no difficulty for the fall performance. Now we must focus on the other main issue that towers over us.”

Sophia hung her head weakly, nodding. Eventually, all six of them quietly started on their cups of tea.

“I’m back.”

The newspaper club’s president announced her return.

Jenny took out some film from her bag and placed it in an envelope labeled ‘UNDEVELOPED’. Then she put her camera bag on the desk and pulled out the camera, which she put in the dresser.

“Thank you for your hard work, Jenny. Here is your cup of tea,” Meg said, pouring a cup for Jenny and placing it in front of her on the desk. Then she returned to her seat on the sofa.

“Thanks, Megmica,” Jenny said, testing the temperature before gulping down her tea. “Huh. This is lukewarm. Did you prepare a cool cup of tea just for me? Because you knew I’d be thirsty?”

“Yes. That way seemed like the best way. For the second cup I will give you a little warmer tea.”

“Then a boiling-hot one for cup #3, right? That’s so considerate of you. You’ll make a great housewife someday, Megmica.”

“Hee hee. Thank you, Jenny. To get married young is one of my dreams for my future.” Seron was completely still.

Jenny finally noticed his presence. “Ah, welcome back to the land of the living.”

“Yeah. Sorry for making you worry. I won’t push myself so hard anymore,” Seron replied, knowing exactly what answer he owed the others. Then he let Larry begin their meeting in earnest.

“Did you find out anything, Jenny? What’d SC Joshua say?”

All eyes were on Jenny; a downcast look rose to her face.

“It was definitely an informative interview from a general perspective, but to be honest I didn’t find out anything we needed. ... So I met Joshua Dennis and chatted with him about school. He knew who I was too, so it wasn’t too awkward.”

“Oh? How’d he know you?” asked Natalia.

“As ‘the tiny journalist girl who published some really funny school newspapers’. It kinda stung, but that doesn’t matter right now. Anyway, we talked a lot and he gave me a tour. I got to watch them rehearse, then I got to see backstage, and even the space under the stage. I took so many pictures I could probably publish a small photo book with them. But—”

“Nothing about our case, huh,” Seron said feebly.

“I asked him about the 50th bee outright. I told him I heard from a certain drama club member that SC Arthur wanted it, and that this might be a good chance to ask. But he didn’t know. He definitely remembers SC Arthur, but he has no idea what the 50th bee is.”

Gloom filled the newspaper club office.

“...Everyone. Thanks so much for everything. But you’ve done enough now,” Sophia said sadly, “Now that I think about it, this might have been impossible from the very beginning. There’s no time left now, so I want to thank you properly and officially withdraw my request. Thank you so much, everyone. I mean it.”

The newspaper club was silent.

Seron tried to say something, but he remembered his conversation with Meg and stopped himself.

Then, the silence was broken—

“Why did you start to love him?”

By none other than Meg.

“Huh?”

Sophia looked up, surprised.

“Why did you start to love him?” Meg asked again, calmly.

“At first, I didn’t find him really remarkable,” Sophia replied, “Isn’t it funny? We were in the drama club together for a long time, but he always came off as unreliable and a little dense. Until the end of last year, he was just a club member in my year.”

“Please keep going,” Meg said, gently spurring on Sophia. Seron and the others listened without cutting in.

“But after SC Joshua left last year, and a girl took over as president after him—do you guys know about the drama club’s tradition?”

“The tradition for switching boys and girls?”

“That’s right. For four years I worked so hard, thinking I would be president someday. But because of that little twist of fate, I ended up becoming the vice-president. I’m all right now, but I was really upset at the time. I couldn’t even blame SC Joshua. It was just bad luck on my part. So I took over as vice-president, and things changed.”

“Then you noticed that SC Arthur works very hard. Yes?”

“Yeah. After he became president, we ended up working together a lot, and I began to see a lot about him I’d never noticed before. He’s passionate about acting, he’s nice to everyone, and maybe because of his personality, he’s really good at managing little details.”

“Mhm. Mhm. So there are many good points!”

“And one day, I was alone with Ms. Krantz when I kind of blurted out, ‘Arthur’s really a good fit for president’. I still remember how Ms. Krantz smiled and replied, ‘Isn’t he?’”

“Hmm...you are all very good people, SC Sophia.”

“Thank you, Megmica. But at the time, I was so ashamed of myself. I’d been performing alongside him for four years, and I hadn’t understood him at all. I wanted to crawl into a hole somewhere and never come out. And that’s when I thought to myself that I’d do my very best as vice-president. I think that’s when it all started. When we were together, I started thinking about him even outside of drama club stuff. I think...”

Sophia finally finished, her freckled cheeks turning red.

The newspaper club members were free to speak. They had smiles on their faces, all five of them ready to say something to the effect of, ‘Don’t worry, SC Sophia! We’ll do our best to help’.

“Then confess to him!”

But the sixth member, Strauski Megmica, beat them to the punch. She leapt from her seat and raised her voice.

“Huh?”

As Sophia stared, wide-eyed, Meg firmly repeated herself.

“Tomorrow, confess your love to SC Arthur!”

“But—we haven’t found—”

“Something like that is not needed!” Meg cut her off. “If you love him like that, it is no use to gift him a nice gift and wait for him to see you with love! Confess to him, just the way you confessed to us just now! I thought now, oh, if only SC Arthur was here to hear your words! If you honestly confess your feelings to SC Arthur, he will reply to your feelings!”

“I see your point, Megmica. And I’ve wanted to tell him outright so many times. Even now I just want to spill everything. But—”

“But what is it?”

“But if he turns me down...then what do I do? What if he doesn’t like me? What if he thinks I’m annoying? I wouldn’t be able to keep going with the drama club. I wouldn’t even be able to stay beside him as vice-president.”

Sophia’s expression darkened as she descended further into negativity. Seron listened carefully, nodding to himself all the while. Larry noticed Seron and gave him a sympathetic look, knowing that Seron was of the same mind when it came to Meg.

Natalia and Nick listened quietly.

Jenny had, at some point, begun taking notes.

Sophia continued.

“Maybe he doesn’t even like outgoing girls like me. Maybe he’s into those cute, cheerful girls that everyone likes.”

“You do not know it until you ask him!”



“But—”

“But what is it? If you take the object SC Arthur wants and gift it to him, does his girls he is into change? It is no different to confess to him with or without the gift!”

Sophia could not argue. Seron spoke up in her defense.

“May I say something, Megmica?”

“Yes! Please say it, Seron,” Meg said. She pointed at Seron, looking almost like a teacher because she was the only one standing.

“Thanks. I see what you’re trying to say, Megmica. But as it stands, the newspaper club hasn’t completed SC Sophia’s request. So I think it might be best for us to think of a different way, a safer way. Something that will satisfy SC Sophia. She still has an entire year and a half left at this school, you know,” Seron said, internally breathing a sigh of relief as he defended his own way of thinking alongside Sophia’s.

But—

“No!” Meg exclaimed mercilessly.

“Huh?”

“If you are so scared, you cannot achieve your love! You will clearly fail!”

“Hm? Wait, I—”

Seron panicked.

“Calm down, buddy. We gotta think of SC Sophia,” Larry said, putting a hand on his shoulder.

“R-right. Yeah.” Seron nodded, getting a hold of himself.

Meg switched targets from Seron to Sophia, who was sitting on the sofa with her mouth agape.

“You must not be scared! If you are scared when you have someone to love, it will not do! If you are scared to say ‘I love you’, that is not real love!”

Meg did not pull any punches.

Sophia took every blow.

Seron also took every blow, and then some salt on his wounds for good measure. He agonized blankly.

‘Hang in there, Seron! You can’t start crying now!’ Larry thought, but he kept the sentiment to himself.

Meg’s onslaught continued.

“I do not have someone I love yet. But! If I do get someone I love, I will probably first confess to him that I love him! It is unsightly when you trip and can’t even confess! That is tricking your heart! That is not real love!”

Larry could hear Seron’s silent screams.

‘Medic! We need a medic here, stat!’ He thought desperately to himself.

“The newspaper club members worked very hard after you gave your request! Jenny went very far today!”

“It wasn’t that far away—”

“Shush!” Natalia cut Jenny off. Nick backed up Meg.

“Yes. It was a difficult week for all of us.”

“It was very difficult. Everyone worked so hard. And look at Seron, please! Seron researched all night very much for you, SC Sophia!”

‘Actually for you, Megmica,’ Larry thought, but kept the correction to himself.

Seron sat blankly, frozen. He did not know what to do. His brain was overloading.

That was when Meg suddenly pointed a finger at him.

“Look! Seron has no energy! He is very tired!”

‘Because of what you’re saying now, Megmica,’ Larry thought, but he kept that addition to himself.

“All this many people worked together to find the answer. All this many people worked very hard. But SC Sophia! You know the most easy way to know the answer!”

“What? You mean...”

“Yes! When you confess, SC Arthur will tell you. Then you can find it! Then you can gift it to him! That is the wise and only way!”

“B-but that’s only *if* he says yes—”

“Do not think of the failed option! You can think of it after you have failed!” Meg said, giving Sophia no time to argue.

Sophia fell silent again. As if on cue—and unnecessarily—Seron finally showed signs of thought. He supposed that he could somehow resolve the situation.

“Er...I don’t think we should rush things, Megmica—”

“No! It seems like you do not have someone you love, Seron! You never had someone you loved! But you will know, when you have someone like that!”

Larry could hear Seron break.

‘Don’t hold back those tears, buddy. Just let it out,’ Larry thought, but he kept the thought to himself. He knew that Seron couldn’t hear a thing at this point anyway.

Seron sat gaping on the sofa, leaning all the way back. His grey eyes were locked on some point on the ceiling above Sophia’s head.

‘Man...once an engine dies, it takes time to get it back up and running again...’ Larry sighed.

Natalia scratched her head.

Jenny fell into thought and took more notes.

Nick steepled his hands before his mouth, watching in silence.

Meg’s barrage returned to Sophia again.

“Go to the dormitories right now, SC Sophia. And confess to him! You will find out definitely what the 50th ant is!”

“...Er...it’s the 50th *bee*.” Sophia managed to whimper a correction.

“Yes! The bee! But ants and bees are the same! They are insects that work very hard for their queens! I want to be like them someday and work hard! No, I *will*! That is my dream! I know it will be hard, but I will never give up!” Meg declared, clasping her hands as though in prayer and looking off into the west. If reality were a play, this would have been the point where the lights went out.

“Huh?” Sophia furrowed her brow.

“What’s that now?” Natalia wondered, also lost.

“You know how Princess Matilda’s the heir to the throne over in Bezel?” Jenny explained.

“Aha.” Natalia nodded. “So they’re going to have a queen next, just like the ants and bees. Makes sense.”

“So the queen’s subjects would be the worker bees. It sounds almost like a riddle.” Nick finally spoke up.

“But it is not wrong!” Meg grinned confidently, placing a hand on her hip.

That was when a spark of life returned to Seron’s eyes.

The spark kickstarted his thoughts.

“Everyone’s really psyched, huh. Probably ‘cause it’s for their annual performance. And apparently—”

On the morning of the first day of practice, just before he saw Meg—

“—And apparently—”

—He had been discussing something with Larry.

“Ah...”

Sophia and the others assumed that Seron had sighed, and did not react. Meg went wild as she began to throw out one crazy confession idea after another at Sophia, who had gone quiet as a mouse.

But the suggestions were too impractical. They could not change the play’s dialogue into a love confession, tell the drama club members to shout out the confession in unison, or use Sophia’s vice-president privileges for a confession.

But Meg’s ideas were finally stopped—

“AHHH!”

By Seron, who stood from his seat with a gasp.

“Ah! Please do not scare me, Seron!” Meg scolded him, puffing up her cheeks, but he did not react.

Instead, Seron looked down at Sophia—who was just as surprised.

“I see now. I’ve got it!”

“Huh?”

Sophia tilted her head. Seron’s gaze moved again, this time to the equally bewildered Larry.

“Larry! Larry Hepburn!”

“Huh? Me? Wh-what is it? Did you figure something out?”

“You were right.”

“Huh?” Larry’s eyes turned to dinner plates. Meg and the others listened on curiously.

“You were right, Larry.”

“About what?”

“The 50th bee. You had the answer.”

“Seriously? Great! See? Even I can help out sometimes! ...So what was it that I got, Seron? What’s the 50th bee?” Larry said, grinning in spite of his confusion.

Seron simply replied,

“It’s the name of a role.”

Chapter 6: The Audience

The 13th day of the seventh month. The final day of the practice camp.

The sky was a blinding blue. It was as windy as ever, and the air was cool.

The last full rehearsal of the camp began that morning in the gymnasium of the 4th Capital Secondary School.

“That was incredible. And we got an early audience preview, too.”

“Yeah. It was moving. It’s definitely something else when you listen to the live music and watch the performances right in front of your eyes.”

The rehearsal ended as Seron and Larry watched.

As Ms. Krantz praised the students, and the rest of the club members—including the orchestra and the chorus club—applauded, Seron narrowed his eyes.

“We still have one more play to go.”

Larry also narrowed his eyes.

“‘Written by Seron Maxwell’. I can’t wait to watch it.”

“Good work, everyone! We’ll have to go through this again when the new term starts, but I know you’ll manage. Let’s have a toast! Everyone ready? To a good summer and a successful fall performance! Cheers!”

The drama club, the orchestra club, the chorus club, and Seron and Larry raised their glasses of juice or tea.

The dormitory cafeteria had never been so crowded. Normally students picked a menu and received their orders at the counter, but this time they were sitting at the long tables with large trays of food before them, which they could take buffet-style.

On the table were meats, vegetables, fish, and even massive dormitory cafeteria-made cakes, crepes, and puddings. The girls were already taking slices of cake.

“Natalia. I realize that someone of your height must need more food, but isn’t that a bit much?” Portman demanded.

“You think so? I’ll try to ease up on the main course then. No guarantees, though. ... What?”

Meanwhile,

“The pudding is really good!”

“Really? I’m going to get some!”

“Oh I want to eat it too. Please let us go together.”

Meg and the chorus club were also enjoying the party.

In the midst of the celebrations, Larry piled a massive piece of lasagna onto his plate.

“I can practically hear Jenny seething from here,” he chuckled. Seron nodded.

“It would be difficult even for us to bring this food to her,” Nick said, walking up to them with a plate in hand. Then he lowered his voice. “Things are progressing smoothly. The king has accepted the queen’s offer.”

Seron nodded discreetly and placed the lasagna he was about to take onto Nick’s plate.

“Excellent work, Black Knight. Here is your reward.”

“It is an honor, my lord.”

* * *

The party went on from lunchtime to snack time. Eventually, the food on the tables disappeared.

The orchestra and the chorus club said goodbye to the drama club as they left the cafeteria.

The drama club members remained for one last briefing from Ms. Krantz and Arthur before the practice camp finally ended. They also thanked Seron and Larry for their help.

Then the drama club members headed up to the dormitories to pack up their things. Seron, Larry, and Nick, however, hurried to the newspaper club office.

Natalia and Meg were already waiting for them there. And—

“Hmph. So now the partygoers are all here. How was the food? Stuffed yourselves?”

Jenny was pouting.

“Jenny. Aren’t you rich enough to literally eat anything you could ever want?” Larry pointed out.

“There’s food out there you just can’t buy with money,” Jenny snapped.

“Then just move into the dorms like Seron.”

“I’m considering it.”

“But don’t even think about renovating your dorm room.”

“Tch.”

Seron cut the exchange short. “It’s almost time.”

“Ah, right.” Jenny stood and produced a large leather bag. “I brought them.”

Inside the bag were six mid-sized binoculars.

“Whoa, these are some nice models.” Larry remarked, handing them out.

“They’re club assets. Don’t use them to peep into girls’ change rooms, Larry.”

“As if. Has anyone here not used binoculars before?”

Natalia and Meg raised their hands. Larry gave them a brief lesson on binocular use. That they should keep the straps around their neck in case they dropped it, how they should adjust their line of sight, and how they could focus the binoculars.

The newspaper club members rushed over to the window and stood in a row. The boys half-knelt right in front of the window, and the girls stood behind them.

Huddled before the window, the six students raised their binoculars. Twelve lenses looked in one direction.

It was a humorous sight to behold, but thankfully no one was around to point that out.

“You’re not gonna get your camera, Jenny?” Larry asked the girl behind him.

“I can’t exactly write an article about this. And it’d be in bad taste to take a celebratory picture.”

“You’re actually pretty sensible, huh.”

“Shut up.”

“Ow.”

Jenny’s binoculars rammed into a head of blond hair.

“Admit it, Jenny. You don’t know how to use binoculars.”

“Yes I do. I also happen to know how to use them as weapons.”

“What are you supposed to be, a spy?”

Beside Larry was Nick, and beside Nick was Seron.

Seron’s grey eyes were glued to his binoculars.

In his line of sight was a certain tree in the back of the school grounds.

The handsome oak tree—which was probably even older than Seron—stood with its leaves rustling in the wind.

“She’s here!” Meg cried from behind Seron. Everyone looked into their binoculars.

“Enter heroine, stage left,” Natalia said. Her glasses were pushed up to her forehead.

On the round stage through the binoculars stood Sophia Ulericks, wearing her school uniform.

Naturally, they were too far to hear anything.

Like a silent movie, Sophia moved quietly but smoothly.

Her hair shook in the wind. On her freckled face was the serious, determined look she wore for performances.

There Sophia waited.

“I hope your old fake article about the tree actually turns out to be true, Jenny,” Larry remarked. Jenny prodded the back of his head with her binoculars again.

“SC Sophia will be just fine. I have faith in Seron’s deduction,” Nick said.

“Me too! It was moving yesterday! It was cool!” Meg exclaimed. Then—

“Here he comes,” Natalia said. Everyone went quiet.

And they turned their binoculars to the direction Sophia was looking at.

Arthur Sears appeared, also clad in school uniform.

When he spotted Sophia, he gave her a light—if awkward—wave and walked over to her.

In the silent distance, they stood under the branches of the massive tree.

The newspaper club members looked on, scrutinizing each and every move.

Sophia smiled nervously and met Arthur’s gaze.

Arthur opened his mouth to speak, looking particularly stiff.

For a time, Sophia said nothing.

Perhaps Arthur could not bear the tension; he made a joke and Sophia chuckled, but that ended quickly.

They froze under the big tree, looking off in different directions.

“C’mon! Just say it already!” Jenny fumed from inside the office, knowing they could not hear her.

“Do your best! Do your best!” Meg cheered.

At that moment—

Sophia looked at them.

She probably could not see them lined up with their binoculars in hand, but she clearly looked at the office window.

Then she smiled with all the beauty and elegance of a queen.

As the newspaper club watched, captivated by her poise, she turned her gaze to the one closest to her—

To Arthur Sears.

She said something. Arthur seemed to speak at the same time.

They looked at each other, both smiling—

And slowly embraced.

“Oh! It is great! It is very great!” Meg cried, almost loud enough to reach the tree.

“Whoa!” Seron cried, startled. Meg had grabbed his shoulder with her free hand.

“It is successfully done, Seron! We did this!” she cheered and shook him relentlessly.

Seron saw the world through the binoculars rock up and down. The figures in his line of sight seemed to rise and fall.

* * *

The previous evening—

“It’s the name of a role,”

Seron declared, the eyes of the newspaper club and Sophia on him.

“It’s the name of a role,” he repeated himself.

“Er...what do you mean?” asked Sophia.

“What’d I say right again?” asked Larry, who had suddenly been proven correct.

Seron first turned to him. “Yesterday, when we were brainstorming about the 50th bee, you said that it might have been the name of a role.”

“Ah, I remember. But didn’t you shoot that idea down? SC Sophia would’ve recognized it if it was.”

“Yeah, but this ‘role’ has nothing to do with any plays. It’s a code word of sorts, but it’s not a very cleverly-hidden one. You just have to think of it like a riddle.”

“Hm?” Larry frowned.

“Then what conclusion have you reached, Seron?” Nick asked.

“You must! You must please tell us!” Meg agreed, still standing.

“Yeah. President’s orders.” “Vice-president’s orders, too,” Jenny and Natalia chimed in.

“All right.” Seron nodded, and turned to Sophia. “All we had to do was think of things associated with the word ‘bee’, like you would with a riddle. And just now, Megmica connected the words ‘bee’ and ‘ant’ with the word ‘queen’.”

“Yes! I did my best!”

“Whoa there, Megmica. Sit down and take a deep breath,” Natalia said, getting Meg to finally take a seat.

“I am sorry. It is Seron’s turn to speak to us.”

“So the word you’re thinking of is ‘queen’? The 50th queen?” asked Sophia. Seron nodded.

“Yes. And the ‘50’ isn’t that difficult to figure out, in hindsight.” He paused, then started again. “I’d completely forgotten what Larry told me a few days ago. ‘Everyone’s really psyched, huh. Probably cause it’s for their annual performance. And apparently this is the 50th to boot’. That was the key.”

“Aha!” Larry exclaimed. “I remember saying that!”

“Yeah. This will be the 50th annual performance, since it’s been exactly 50 years since the drama club was founded. But what does that have to do with a 50th queen?”

“Everything,” Seron said. Meg piped up, still whipped up in a frenzy.

“Then! Then is SC Arthur wishing to be a queen instead of a king in this 50th performance? Is it too late to change? Will he wear a dress costume?”

“Deep breaths, Megmica,” Natalia advised, putting a hand on Meg’s shoulder.

“No. The 50th bee is a role, but it’s not a role he wants to play. What SC Arthur meant was is that he wanted the person in that role.”

“Hm?” Sophia furrowed her brow.

“I get it now.” Jenny nodded perceptively.

Seron continued. “I began to think about what 50th queen there might be at this school whom SC Arthur might want. And I realized there was only one possible conclusion. Who do you think it is?”

Sophia fell into thought. But she soon gave up.

“Who is it?”

Seron’s reply was simple.

“It’s you, SC Sophia.”

“What?” Sophia gasped.

“Hm? Aha.” “Huh?”

Nick understood and Larry frowned.

“It’s you, SC Sophia. If not for last year’s unusual circumstances, you would have been the 50th president of the club—in other words, the queen. SC Arthur is very aware of that fact. Sometimes, he even wonders if he was right to accept his role at all. Even as he carries out his duties, a part of him seems to consider you the true president. That’s the reasoning behind this moniker. To sum up, SC Arthur is in love with you and wants you to be his girlfriend.”

“Wh-what are you saying, Seron?”

“I’m simply giving you the answer to the question you brought us, SC Sophia. We haven’t checked with SC Arthur in person, but I’m convinced this is the right answer. Last night, when Nick asked him what he wanted for his birthday, SC Arthur was supposedly very taken aback. That’s probably part of the reason as well. SC Arthur is desperate to have the 50th bee, in a figurative sense.”

Sophia was lost for words.

“There’s only one thing left for you to do, SC Sophia. You can do this. We can help with the production of this play.”

“...”

“SC Sophia? Are you listening?”

* * *

“It is successfully done, Seron! We did this!” Meg cried, shaking Seron by the shoulder. Natalia lowered her binoculars. “Mhm. I think we can let ‘em be,” she said, putting on her glasses. “Now calm down, Megmica.”

“I suppose it is not good to peep even more anymore.”

“Yeah. Long as we know the plan worked out. Looks like we won’t need Mr. Hartnett on this one.”

Nick and Larry also lowered their binoculars and hung them around their necks. The round frames around their lines of sight disappeared.

“It is great! I am moved!” Meg raved, lowering her binoculars with a smile.

Once the boys were on their feet, Seron closed the window.

In that instant, he spotted two figures standing closely side-by-side.

“Looks like this mission was a success.”

Once the others were seated on the sofas, Jenny personally poured them cups of tea and sat down on the sofa herself.

“What do you say to a toast?” Larry suggested.

“Yes!” Meg chirped. The six students raised their differently-shaped cups.

“Well, president?” Nick urged.

“Me? Fine. ... We had a rough week, everyone. But good job! Cheers!”

Everyone but Jenny toasted for the second time that day, and Jenny for the first time.

“Wonder who said it first?” Natalia wondered.

“I think both people at the same time! Their hearts are synchronized!”

“I’m surprised you know such a hard word, Megmica. Let’s just leave it at that, then. It’s bad manners to actually ask in person.”

“It is a very beautiful situation!”

Seron silently sipped his tea as he watched the girl with the radiant smile. And he also put on a small smile of his own.

“It seems the tale of the tree with a perfect confession success rate has one more story to serve as evidence,” Nick pointed out.

“Line 1 of article 1 on page 1. Not like I believe it, though,” Jenny said.

“Seriously, Jenny?” Larry sighed. “You know what? Who cares now? It was a success and that’s what matters most. Are you gonna write about this?”

“Hmm... nah. It’s not something to report to the public. I’d be hot on their heels with a camera in hand if they got married straight out of school, though.”

“Heh heh. You do that, Jenny.” Larry chuckled, bringing his cup to his mouth.

“It was very great... the two people in love. It was great,” Meg repeated herself, placing her cup on the table and looking up at the ceiling with a euphoric look. “Someday, I want to meet someone good as well!”

She looked back down. Her eyes met those of Seron, who had been looking at her.

“You were very great too, Seron!” Meg said suddenly.

Seron twitched, like he had been jolted.

“Seron! If I am in the same shoes as SC Sophia, please help me find my answer! Please do!”

Seron broke again.

‘I feel for you, buddy... you can cry later. Whether it’s tears of happiness or pain’s up to you, though,’ Larry thought, but he naturally kept it to himself.

* * *

Once all the cups were empty and Seron had powered back up, Jenny addressed everyone with a note and pen in hand.

“Do you have any plans for the summer? This month, in particular? Nick first.”

“I plan to go back home and finish off my homework, first of all. I prefer to get it done ahead of time. Otherwise, I have no plans.”

“Hm. No family vacations?”

“We just returned from one this week.”

“Right. Nat?”

“I’ll chill at home. Sick of violin, and I’m gonna pass on the homework for now. And my folks’re always off touring, so we almost never go on vacation together.”

“I see. Larry?”

“Once my brother Cato gets back, we might go to our villa for five days or so. We don’t have a date yet, but I’ll tell you once it’s set in stone.”

“Sure. Give me a call. Megmica?”

“Erm. Tomorrow, I will meet with Lillia who has come back from the vacation. Then I do not have plans. I rarely go back to my hometown.”

“Mhm. Last up is Seron. You’re leaving today?”

“Yeah. I’m taking the sleeper train tonight. I should start getting ready to leave soon. I don’t have any plans for summer—probably homework and reading. It’s just my sister and our mother at home, but our mother’s so busy we probably won’t get to go anywhere.”

“I see. All right. I want everyone to give me an address and phone number I can contact you with over the summer, in case I decide to make a club announcement. I just might give you a call about our next club activity.”

Jenny turned over the page and handed her notepad to Meg, who was next to her.

“I will.”

Meg wrote down her contact information and handed the notepad to Natalia.

“Hope you can read chicken scratch.”

Natalia wrote down her contact information and handed the notepad to Nick. Nick wrote down his contact information and handed the notepad to Seron.

Seron wrote down his contact information and stared at Meg’s at the top of the page.

And once he was done, he very calmly handed the notepad to Larry.

“All right. It’s my turn—” Larry paused. “Seron, you wrote down the dormitory address.”

“Huh?”

As Seron corrected his contact information, Nick made a suggestion.

“Jenny, do you perchance have any extra pieces of paper? I’d like to get the contact information of everyone in the club.”

“Sure. One sec.”

Jenny opened the desk drawer and produced a bundle of small scraps of paper. Then she placed them and several pens on the coffee table.

“Write one for everyone and pass them out, or ask everyone to write on your sheet of paper. It’s up to you.”

Natalia said, “Hands up if you don’t know my contact info.”

Larry, Nick, and Seron raised their hands.

“Then that’s three from me,” she said, grabbing three scraps of paper.

“Three for me as well.”

Meg, Seron, Larry, and Nick also began to write. Jenny realized that she should give out her information as well and picked up some scraps.

For some time the office was filled with the sound of writing. Natalia, who finished first, passed out her information to the boys.

“Here. Here. And here.”

Meg carefully folded her notes in half and placed them where they wouldn’t get in anyone’s way.

“Here you are. Here you are. Here you are.”

Seron, Larry, and Nick eventually finished and handed out their information.

“Thanks, everyone. I’ll copy these down in my address book later.”

Very stoically and with exceptional calm, Seron placed the papers from Nick, Natalia, Jenny, and Meg into his jacket pocket. He also made certain that the others—especially Meg—did not forget to take his contact information.

“I’d better get going now,” he said, “So much happened in the past week but it was a lot of fun. I might not see you guys until the new term because I live so far, but I hope we’ll get along as a club together.”

“Spoken like a true honor student.” Nick chuckled. “Feel free to visit the Capital District any time. My house is always open to guests.”

“Same.” Larry nodded. “I’m heading out too, guys. Congratulate SC Sophia for me if you see her.”

Jenny nodded. “Sure.”

Seron and Larry stood.

“I think I’ll stay back for some more tea,” Nick said, electing to remain a little longer.

“See you guys.” Larry grinned.

“Have a good summer, everyone. I’ll see you later,” Seron said.

“Take care,” said Nick.

“See you. I’ll give you guys a call,” said Jenny.

“I’ll call if I ever need any brainpower. Just Seron, though,” said Natalia.

And finally—

“I will see you two later.” Meg said.

Seron and Larry waved one last time before leaving the office and closing the door behind them.

As they walked through the empty building, Seron suddenly stopped. Larry, who had been walking a little ahead, turned.

“What’s up? ...Aha.”

Seron was staring at the gymnasium.

The quiet gymnasium towered in the cool breeze.

Seron resumed walking, and this time caught up to Larry with a smile.

"That was great. Thanks so much for getting me to come, Larry Hepburn."

"It sure was loads of fun, Seron Maxwell," Larry said, offering a handshake. Seron took it.

They began to walk again.

"I'm a changed man now. I'm different from the Seron Maxwell who walked in here eight days ago."

"Hah hah. Sure thing. You couldn't even talk to her before, but now you have her address and her number."

"I'm going to make this an heirloom."

"Whoa, wait a sec! You have to call her! Call her as soon as you get home! If I remember, you have a telephone at home!"

"Wouldn't it be rude to call out of the blue?" Seron wondered gravely. Larry stared—

'Ah, so he's not a completely changed man,' he thought, but did not voice the comment.

"Sure. Anyway, Jenny might be cooking up something for the break. Come visit sometime," he said instead. Seron smiled.

"Sure thing!"

* * *

Just like eight days ago, Seron Maxwell was wearing his jacket. Larry was in his uniform. They walked away from the dormitories where they had spent the past week.

"See you later, Seron!"

"Have a good summer, Larry."

They parted ways at the gates, where Seron boarded a taxi.

At Capital West Station, Seron boarded his usual long-distance sleeper train.

As usual, he had the entire first class cabin to himself. For a time he watched the Capital District pass by outside the window.

After the conductor had checked his ticket and the city outside had given way to a sunset countryside—

Seron opened his suitcase and fished out a leather-bound agenda.

Inside were the scraps of paper from earlier. Seron took out a pen and copied down the information into his address book.

He left the folded one for the very end. Once he was done with the rest, Seron froze for several seconds before opening it up.

On the scrap of paper were more words than the others had left for him.

First came Meg's name.

Her address.

Her phone number.

And—

Dear Mr. Seron Maxwell,

With the problem of the Sou Be-Il man in the basement, and the request from SC Sophia, I was moved very much by your cool actions.

I am very happy to know you, Seron.

Please take good care of me from now on. Please talk to me if you meet me at the school.

From Strauski Megmica.

PS: I am sorry if my Roxchean writing is difficult to understand.

“Heirloom.” Seron nodded.

* * *

“Oh. Welcome back, Seron. Where’s my souvenir?”

“I’m back, Leena. I got you the same thing this time, if you don’t mind.”

“You’re the best, Seron. Thanks. ... You look happy today.”

“Really?”

“Yeah. You always look blank, but your expressions change by something like a fraction of a millimeter. Mom and I can tell.”

“...”

“Did something good happen while you were helping out?”

“...”

“Did you get a girlfriend?”

“Huh? N-no. It’s nothing like that.”

“Oh. You look really gloomy, so I guess not.”

“But—”

“But?”

“...”

“C’mon, you can’t just leave me hanging like that.”

“But...well, what can I say?”

“Hm?”

“What *can* I say?”

“...So something good happened after all.”

“I guess you could say that.”

“Introduce me next time.”

“To whom?”

“The girl you like.”

“...”

“Oh. You don’t have one?”

“Huh? Couldn’t you read my expressions, Leena?”

“Nope. You’re like a mask, Seron. I was just making random guesses. Thanks for the souvenir! Mom’s coming back later tonight.”

* * *

Several days later.

Seron was in the central gardens, where the summer flowers were in spectacular bloom. Sitting in a white wooden chair under a lacy parasol, he enjoyed the summer breeze and read.

The book was titled—

‘Bezelese for Beginners’

At times he exclaimed,

“What *is* this language...? This is inhuman...”

Or,

“Jenny...you are a monster.”

Or,

“Roxchean is so simple it’s making us Easterners into idiots...”

And he agonized on occasion.

He was so engrossed in the book that, each time the maid came to refill his tea, she found the cup still full.

Eventually, the sun sank so low that the parasol could no longer shield him.

“Young Master. You have a phone call from your school friend, Miss Jenny Jones. Will you take the call?” one of the maids said, instead of bringing more tea.

“From Jenny? I’ll take it.”

Seron put a bookmark on his page, put the book on the table, and hurried to the telephone in the mansion’s living room.

-To be continued-

■ソフィア先輩

■アサー先輩

■黒星紅白の
あとがき。

こんにちは。
『メグとゼロⅢ』
お買い上げ頂き
お忙しいと思います。

今回の
メインなところにも
かかろう。
挿絵に登場
する事の無かった
不慣れな
アサー先輩……。
イメージがための
うづみ感じの
設定画でずいど
こは感じていた。
ソフィア先輩の
設定画は
もちろんジャージだ!

